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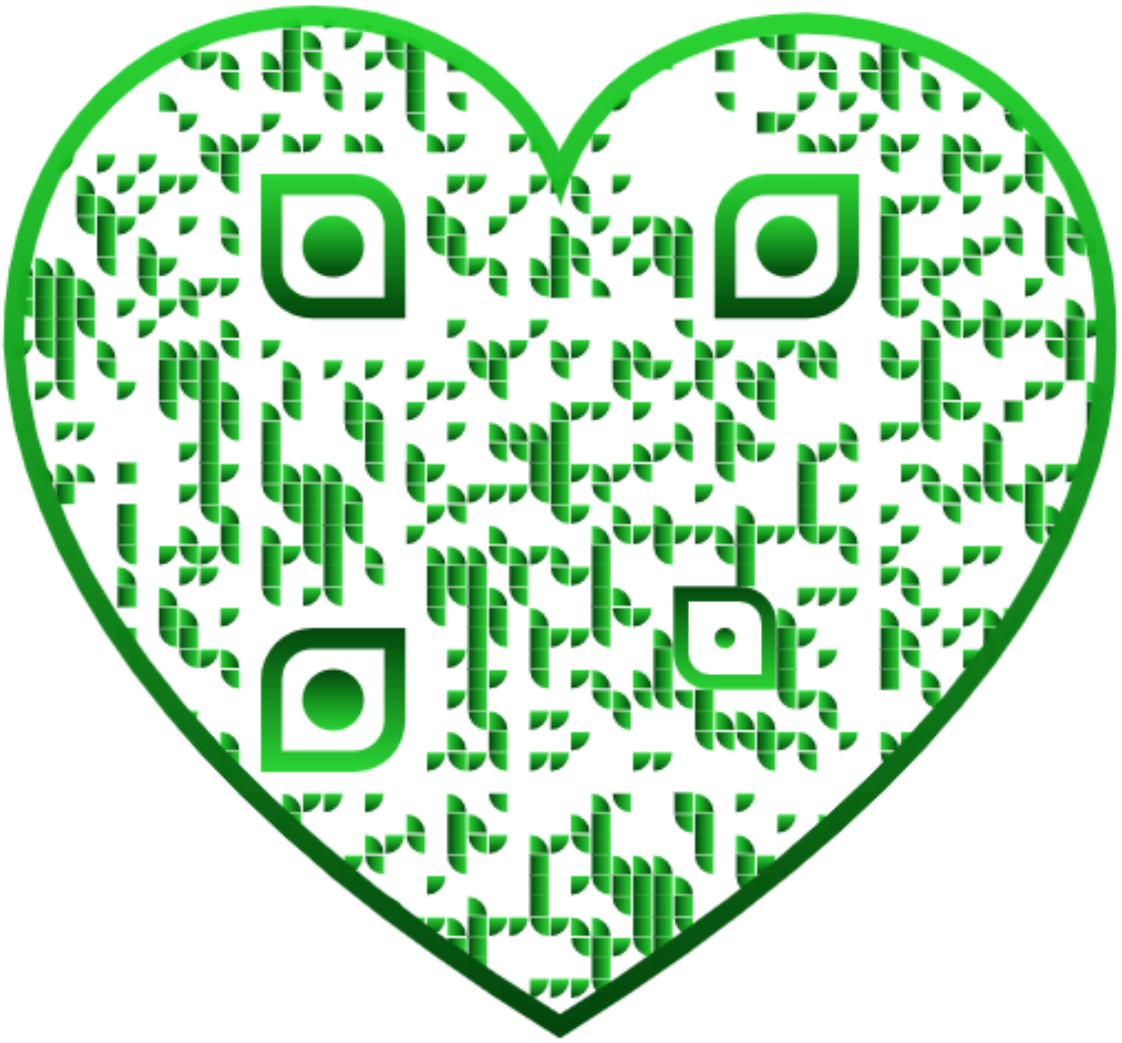

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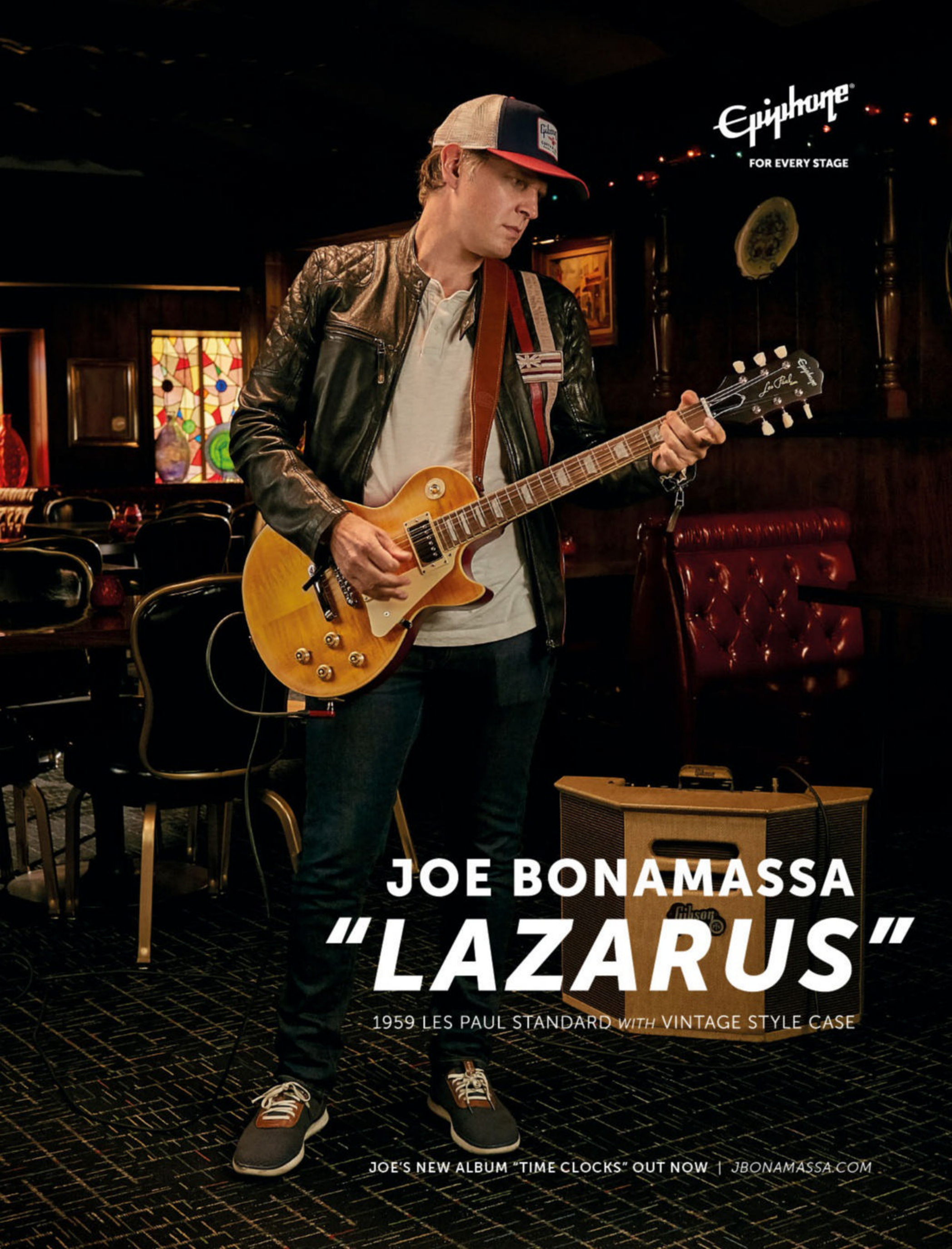
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PSYCHO CIRCUS

HOTTER THAN HELL. That's how it felt as we sweated out this issue's cover story. What started as a seemingly surefire invitation to talk with the Kiss camp about the 45th anniversary edition of *Destroyer* became an increasingly tenuous proposition as the weeks before deadline dwindled down to days and we had yet to conduct a single interview. Things dragged on so long that one of our writers, Richard Bienstock, had to drop out due to other commitments. His footwork was not in vain, however, as we passed his assignment over to James Volpe Rotondi, who carried on through hell and high water before delivering the last of the goods — an interview with the Spaceman himself, Ace Frehley — shortly before the issue closed.

If by chance you're not familiar with *Destroyer*, you may wonder why we worked so hard to create this issue of *Guitar Player*. If so, I encourage you to read this month's story — but moreover, I heartily suggest you start by listening to *Destroyer* itself, the 1976 album on which Kiss found their groove as a studio act. For years prior to then, the group had honed its stagecraft into a circus show of music and theatrical daredeviltry delivered in high-camp style. At the time that Kiss entered the Record Plant in New York City to create *Destroyer* in the early weeks of 1976, they were enjoying a commercial high, courtesy of their 1975 concert album, *Alive!* (some call it *Kiss Alive!*, as do Kiss themselves — although they would, wouldn't they?). Over the subsequent weeks, the group became a savvy studio act, thanks to the boot-camp-style indoctrinations of the producer they chose to helm *Destroyer*: Bob Ezrin. Fresh from his work with Alice Cooper, and still a few years from his celebrated production on Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, Ezrin whipped Paul, Gene, Ace and Peter into shape, helping them create the album that defined them for the ages.

I'd like to extend my thanks to the Kiss camp and especially to Todd Nakamine at Funhouse Entertainment for his assistance with this issue's cover story. I also salute Mr. Rotondi for his perseverance, journalistic excellence and unflagging good humor in the face of a crushing deadline. What more can I say? I hope you enjoy the issue.

But before I go, I would be remiss if I didn't note that, as the calendar turns another year, so does *Guitar Player* celebrate another birthday — number 55. Thank you sincerely for your continued support over these many years, and best wishes and good health to you in the coming one.

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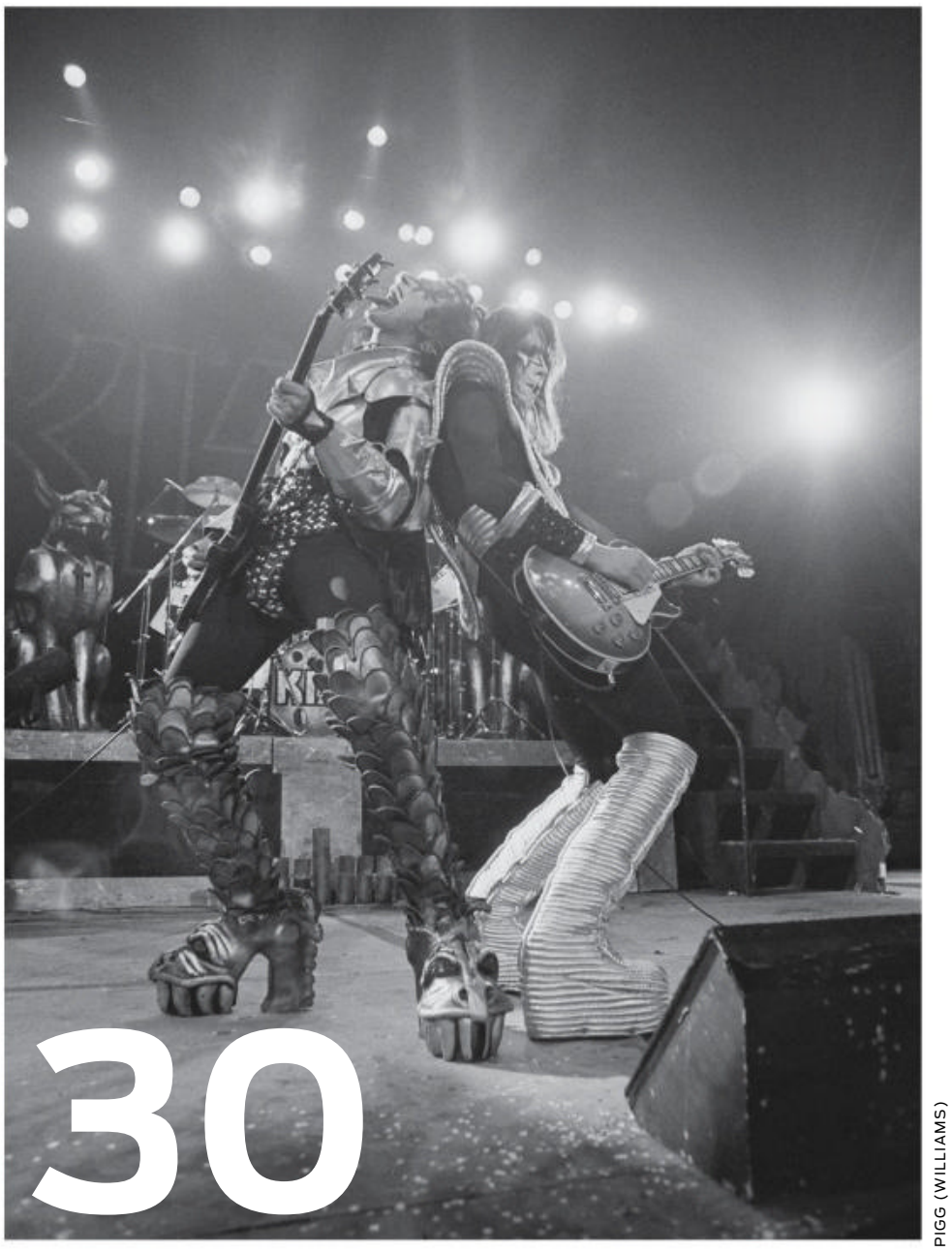

FIN COSTELLO/GETTY IMAGES (KISS); TRACY ANNE HART (FOLEY); DANNY CLINCH (SHARRARD); ZACH PIGG (WILLIAMS)

ON THE COVER
Kiss onstage circa 1977
Michael Putland Archives/
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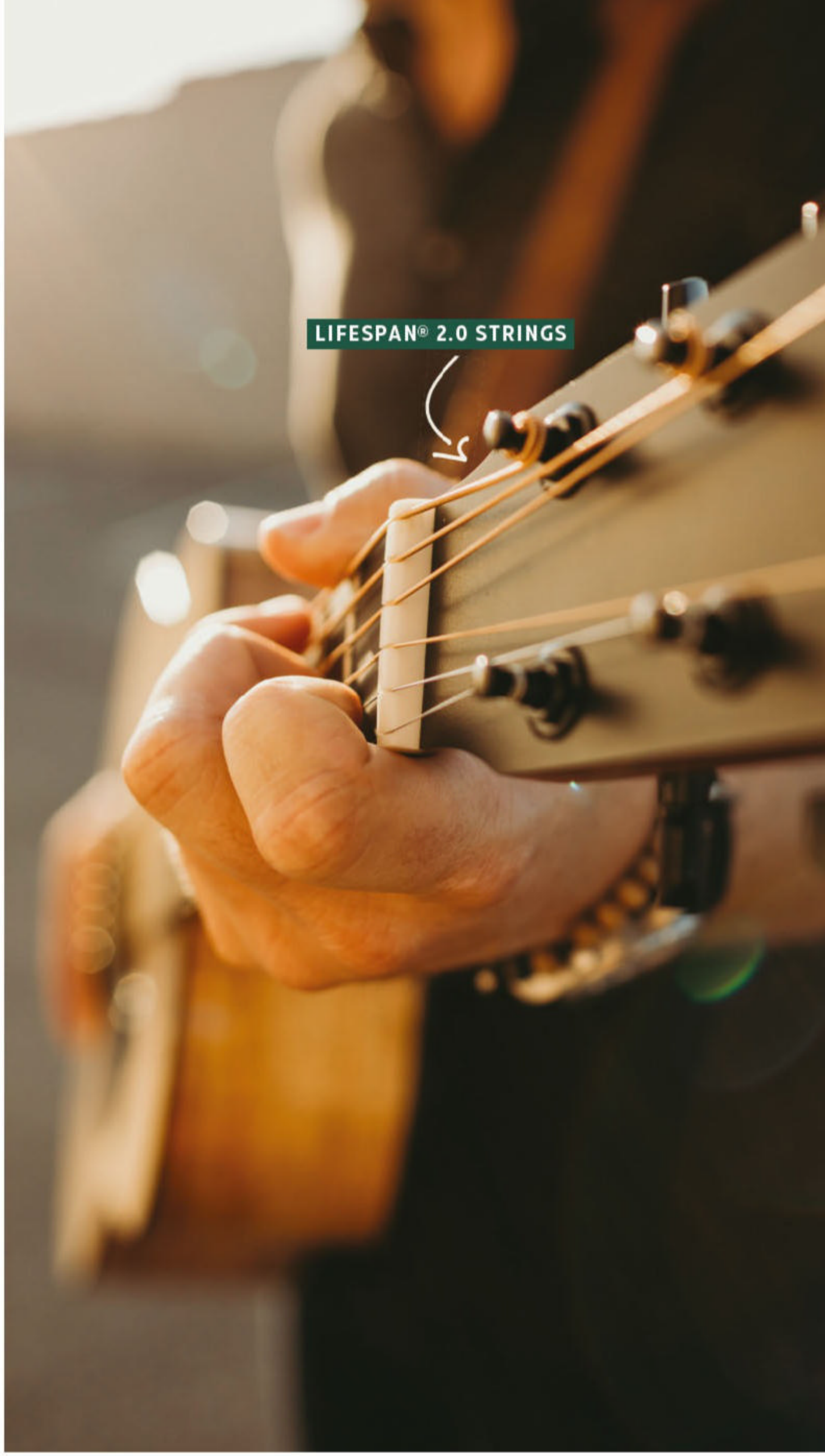

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RETRO-MODERN MARVEL

Mike Baranik's "Arabella" B-1 brings 1960s-inspired guitar design to the boutique market.

BY DAVE HUNTER

IF A CASUAL glance tells you the Baranik B-1 is an homage to the fun, funky, cheap and cheerful Italian catalog guitars of the '60s, you are entirely correct. But it's only when you get in close and take this beauty in your hands that you discover what that quirky inspiration becomes when rendered by an acclaimed luthier long known for his achievements in high-end acoustic guitar building.

As a teenager growing up in New Jersey in the 1980s, Mike Baranik was inexorably drawn to heavy rock and the electric guitar that was front and center within it. Heading west in his late teens with plans to attend the Guitar Institute of Technology in Los Angeles as a springboard to rock stardom, he was dismayed by the number of struggling guitarists he found populating the Sunset Strip. Seeing their plight gave him the notion that it might be better to build guitars for a living than to play them.

After attending the Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery in Phoenix, Baranik segued into high-end acoustic guitar making and quickly forged a reputation for creating original and finely crafted instruments. Dial up an example of one of Baranik's flattops from the 2000s and you'll see how quickly the maker hit his stride. These exotic and original creations display a number of elegant and innovative touches, and commonly sell for $6,000 to $10,000, even on the pre-owned market. While his interest in the acoustic remained hot, however, the electric was calling him back — and he was ready to indulge in something special.

One school of thought holds that beauty is found in symmetry. Another, conversely, contends that true beauty in any work of art lies in both slight imperfections and asymmetry, which better grab the attention. The B-1 somehow manages to have it both ways, blending the symmetrical, asymmetrical and offset in one doozy of a *Jetsons*-aged retro-rocket monster guitar. As playful and idiosyncratic as our review guitar — dubbed Arabella — might appear, it is undeniably a first-rate instrument, something that becomes obvious the moment you take it in hand. As such, it achieves a very specific end toward the maker's own desires.

"I've always loved weird guitars that have their own personality," Baranik tells us. "The problem with a lot of those guitars, especially the ones from Japan, is that they are usually hard to play. I have a couple of Teisco guitars, and they look and sound amazing, but the necks are really thick, there's no truss rod, the frets are uneven and the hardware isn't so great. So I take a lot of inspiration from these guitars and then design something that looks along those lines but has the best possible playability and tonal options.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BARANIK GUITARS

"I do think that my experience with building acoustics for so long — and really not paying attention to the electric guitar trends of the past 20 years — has perhaps helped create a unique perspective. I try to stay away from whatever is trending, even with acoustics."

To check the basic-specs boxes, this guitar is an original offset design made to a 25-inch scale length, with a bolt-on neck made from hard maple, a solid alder body and three pickups.

"I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED WEIRD GUITARS THAT HAVE THEIR OWN PERSONALITY"

Dig in, though, and you'll find these basics barely tell the story. The body is carved in Baranik's dome-top style, with hand-carved bevels and softly rounded edges, made even more ergonomic with leg and belly contours at the back. It gives some subtle arch and motion to what would otherwise be a flattop build and aids the guitar's overall esthetics in a subtly appealing way. Baranik hand-mixes his own colors, and our example features a Satin-White Pearl combined with what he calls Blue Mist for just a hint of blueing that makes it whiter than white. The blue-sparkle control plates are immaculately cut and beveled, and they're complemented by a pickguard of polished aluminum with an engraving of a "space girl" brandishing a ray gun, an image entirely apropos to the comic-book themes here.

The headstock is a unique three-to-a-side offset design.

The neck has a comfortably rounded slim-C profile that's relatively thin without feeling flat, and it's topped with a fingerboard cut from a sleek piece of torrified royal blackwood (a.k.a. purpleheart), with glow-in-the-dark side-edge position markers (the first I've seen that don't look gimmicky). Down at the far end, a "captured" — inset from the edges — Corian nut spans a fingerboard width of 1.70 inches, so there's plenty of room to roam between the immaculately dressed frets. It's up at the far end, though, that Baranik exercises one of his signature moves: a uniquely offset, three-per-side headstock that cleverly allows for a straight string pull while looking extremely groovy. It's faced with a matching sliver of that nifty blue-sparkle that the control plates are made from, and carries locking Hipshot tuners with barrel buttons.

Although those control plates will get a lot of attention for their looks, there's also plenty going on with the electronics mounted into

them. The neck and bridge pickups are Mojo (U.K.) gold-foil-style single-coils inside Firebird enclosures with silver-foil inserts, and there's a Baranik-made lipstick-tube pickup in the middle. Each has its own on-off switch — a NOS Alco mini-toggle — as well as its own volume control, a NOS Centralab potentiometer. The shared tone control is capped with a recycled radio knob with a push-pull switch for bass-cut of the neck pickup. A locking mini-switch on the lower cutaway horn flips the phase of the middle pickup. Finally, the 1/4-inch output jack is in a custom brass housing that further emphasizes the ray-gun theme.

Body-end hardware includes a Goldo tremolo and roller-saddle bridge, which are both efficient and work extremely well together. The '60s-era catalog-grade setup may suggest otherwise, but tuning stability is surprisingly good, and the action is smooth and easy, if not dive-bombingly deep. It should be noted that Baranik has recently begun selling his guitars via direct-order only. This one was commissioned by boutique dealer Destroy All Guitars and sold to a new owner in Switzerland as soon as it arrived.

I tested the B-1 "Arabella" through a Carr Super Bee 1x10 combo and a custom JTM-45–like head with 2x12 cab and found it

An engraving of a raygun-wielding space girl graces the aluminum pickguard.

a delightfully original and inspiring experience throughout. It should go without saying that this guitar was designed first and foremost to allow players to create new and original tones. By default, we like to assess if a guitar can achieve this or that classic tone, and to some extent, yes, the B-1 can get you into several ballparks with the guitar and amp controls set just right. But you're not acquiring a unique creation like this to sound like Angus Young (to take it in one direction) or Mark Knopfler (to take it in another). Yet it approximates those sounds just fine when you ask it to.

The overall setup lends a slightly Jazzmaster-like jangle and chime to the whole affair, but the B-1 is begging you to throw convention out the window and craft entirely new templates that will stand out in the mix, and that's what's so refreshing about it. It delivers lots of trebly shimmer and bite without driving into harshness, as well as loads of funky, scooped, phasey sounds with that characteristic gold-foil blend of brightness, bite and girth. The B-1 is a superb machine for janglier indie and alternative stylings, snarling garage rock when pushing some overdrive, and bountiful soundscaping. Plus, it will get you noticed onstage, which is half the fun of a playful guitar like this.

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LIGHT AND SHADE

Zakk Wylde emerges from lockdown with an album that laces ballads with twin-guitar rockers.

BY MARK MCSTEA

ZAKK WYLDE FIRST came to prominence when he joined Ozzy Osbourne's band as a replacement for Jake E. Lee, making his recorded debut with Ozzy in 1988 on *No Rest for the Wicked*. The gig was a dream job for Wylde, who'd always loved Black Sabbath and cited Randy Rhoads as one of his favorite guitarists. Ozzy initially wrote off Wylde as a Rhoads clone, but once the guitarist got the chance to show what he could do, it was a no-brainer for the Prince of Darkness. Wylde has featured on Ozzy's records and in his live band on-and-off ever since. He embarked on a solo career while with Ozzy, recording *Pride and Glory* in 1994 and *Book of Shadows* in 1996. Wylde formed his own band, Black Label Society, in 1999 and has released 15 albums under that banner.

Though Wylde has long been known for his berserker Viking image and uniquely pulverizing guitar tone and riffs, there is far more to his playing than down-tuned grooves and screaming pinched harmonics, as heard on the new BLS album, *Doom Crew Inc*. (eOne). The record showcases three ballads that amply illustrate Wylde's range of moods, styles and songwriting talents.

"I GET AN EXPLOSION OF CREATIVITY ONCE I GET INTO THE MINDSET AND START WORKING ON NEW SONGS"

How did the pandemic affect the making of this new record?

When we came off the road, we figured we'd be back home for a month. Before we knew what was going on, it was over a year. We just thought we might as well make another record because we sure weren't going to be doing any shows. I arranged for the guys to come out to my studio here, the Black Vatican. I spent a month working on riffs and ideas. The way that I work is to complete a whole song,

JESSE WILD

rather than stockpile an idea for a chorus or a bridge or something. I tracked all the guitars, with no drums or bass, and the rest of the guys laid down their parts in a couple of days.

You're someone who seems to be constantly touring. How did you handle the enforced layoff from live work?
Usually there's a cycle — you're getting ready for something, and there's a reason why you're practicing or rehearsing or whatever. Having the album and working on artwork, or whatever, gave me a real focus. I get an explosion of creativity once I get into the mindset and start working on new songs.

Your approach this time was a little different in that you traded solos on a few songs with Dario Lorina, who also plays guitar with BLS.
On certain songs, such as "Set You Free" and "You Made Me Want to Live," I'd already written the solo ideas, and I got Dario to play some of those parts, a little like the Allman Brothers or something. But on others, he just came up with his own parts. He's an amazing guitarist, plus he can play piano and sing.

You're not afraid to explore a more sensitive side in your music, with three strong ballads on the album. Where does that influence come from?
My first mind-blowing experience with music was when I saw Elton John singing "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds," on *Cher* [*hosted by singer-actress Cher*] in the '70s. That was when I first got chills at the power of music. Elton is a master of the emotional ballad. The thing is, as much as I love Zeppelin doing "Black Dog," I love "Going to California," you know? Same with Sabbath. I loved it when they did "Changes."

What Wylde Audio gear did you use?
I use all my Wylde Audio guitars. I use the Nomad for the rhythms and the Heathens for some of the solos. I've been using Wylde Audio amps for the last three albums. There's some new designs coming out soon as well: the Thorax, the Raider, the Vulture and the Condor.

Zakk Wylde with a selection of his Wylde Audio guitars.

You were always a huge Sabbath fan, and you even have your own tribute band, Zakk Sabbath. I guess it must have been a dream come true for you to hook up with Ozzy, whereas, ironically, Randy Rhoads never actually liked playing the Sabbath songs.
Yeah, totally. It's kind of crazy that Randy didn't like Black Sabbath, I thought everybody liked Black Sabbath. [*laughs*] But then again, I think that's the reason that Randy worked so well, because he came from a completely different direction and a completely different set of influences. I was always a Sabbath freak, and I still am. What is hilarious is that when I was 15, I was playing Sabbath songs at keg parties, and now I'm 54 years old and I'm still playing Sabbath songs at keg parties. Though I guess the crowds are a little bigger. [*laughs*]

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Doom Crew Inc
"Forever and a Day,"
"Love Reign Down,"
"Gather All My Sins,"
"Set You Free,"
"Farewell Ballad"

You're pretty loud live. Have you suffered any hearing issues after all these years?
Well, I do have tinnitus, but then again nearly everyone I know who's been on the road a long time has issues to some degree. The funny thing is that when the alarm goes off on my freezer because the door was left open, my wife will ask me if I can hear it, and I can't because it's at exactly the same pitch as my tinnitus. [*laughs*]

You've seen big budgets with Ozzy, but things have changed so much now that I guess you have to tour to survive in the music business.
It's a different thing. When I first started with Ozzy, if you didn't get a record deal by the time that you were 30, the dream was over, right? I can't tell you how many musicians I knew who'd been struggling for years and didn't get that deal and finally thought it was time to try to get a job.

Today, you can be your own boss if you don't get a record deal. Any band starting out now, they'll be on social media, recording at home, booking tours over the internet and building the empire. There's no sense that if you don't get that deal you're a failure, because you can build your own career. In that regard the business today is awesome, because whoever can put the work in and grind it out can survive. As long as you bring enough in to pay your bills, you can keep plugging away.

You communicate so much through your solos, and of course there is so much more range that the guitar can explore compared to the voice. Have you ever been tempted to record an instrumental album?
When Eddie Van Halen was asked why he didn't do a solo record, he said that every Van Halen record was a chance for him to express everything that he needed to say. It's that way for me, whether I'm playing with Black Label or Ozzy. I've always really loved songs. I love McLaughlin, Paco De Lucia, Jan Hammer. There's a lot to love in instrumental albums, but when I hear "Stairway to Heaven," that solo is perfect — but it's in a song. I love to have the solo in a great song. That's what works best for me.

JEN ROSENSTEIN

Lee Ritenour plays a Yamaha Silent Guitar in 2012

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

With thousands of sessions to his name, Lee Ritenour picks five solo tracks that define his multi-genre career.

BY MARC McSTEA

FROM HIS FIRST session for the Mamas & the Papas when he was just 16, Lee Ritenour forged a career working in L.A.'s pressure-cooker session scene and became a first-call guy for every major act from Michael Jackson to Pink Floyd. "I've done every style of music except country," he tells *Guitar Player*.

After becoming one of the most recorded guitarists in history, Ritenour decided in 1976 to make the switch from session superstar to solo artist with his debut album, *First Course*. "For modern-day readers, that session era probably seems like a thousand years ago," Ritenour says. "The mid-to-late '70s was an interesting period because, having already been established as a studio musician playing just about everything, I needed to create my own sound. My first album was a little lighter in feel to *Captain Fingers* [*1977*], which did well for me. Fusion guitar was really starting to come through with Al Di Meola, John McLaughlin, Allan Holdsworth and the rest."

Although Ritenour's career has proceeded without a hitch, he has suffered terrible personal misfortune. In the space of a few months in 2018, his house burned to the ground, taking with it priceless personal possessions, guitars and music. Soon afterward, he had major heart surgery. [*See* Guitar Player*'s March 2021 issue for our interview with the guitarist.*] Ritenour rebounded from those setbacks to record *Dreamcatcher*, which was released last year. "It was interesting that I got the chance to do that album, after the fire and the surgery," he says. "It was a good way of getting myself back on track. It definitely functioned as part of the healing process."

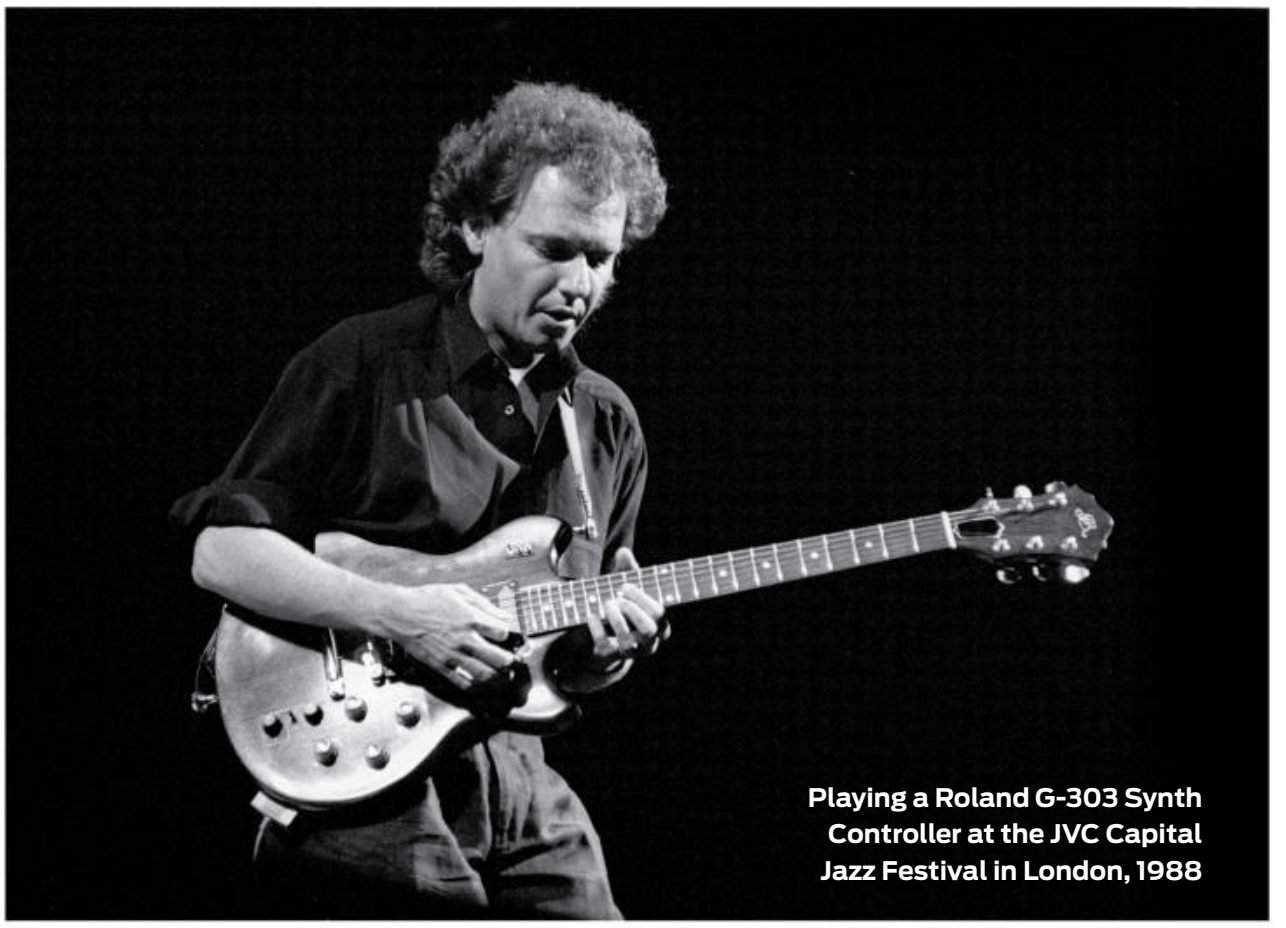
As a guitarist who worked hard to find his own voice on the instrument, Ritenour has strong thoughts about what musicians must do today to forge a unique identity in a world where countless teenage prodigies steal views on social media and the like. "You have to be very wary about the fact that everybody has amazing technique," he says. "A lot of kids can copy incredible things, but the depth that goes into creating your own style and your

WILL IRELAND

own voice is much harder to achieve. I always stress the need to compose. You have to be a B.B. King, a Wes or a Jeff Beck, with such a strong individual identity to be able to do someone else's song and make it your own. Look at Sinatra: Every song he sang became a Sinatra song. I think it's particularly important for anyone interested in making a career in music to always be learning about the music business itself. Understand promotion and social media, and find ways to get yourself heard."

He likewise has strong feelings about rhythm guitar. "You need to listen to the history of accompaniment guitar, not only in this country with things like rhythm and blues but also in areas like folk music in England, or old blues," he offers. "Even in medieval times, the lute was used to accompany singers. The role of accompaniment is such an important thing to understand. Segovia used to say that the guitar was a mini orchestra. A lot of times when I was on sessions, I was listening to what the drummer and bass player were playing and trying to fit into the cracks. Most importantly, uppermost in my mind, was what the song called for, which most often was what the singer needed."

Like many artists, Ritenour has lost an enormous amount of live work due to the pandemic and is eager to get back on the road. "Besides thinking about getting back out there, I've got a couple more studio projects brewing for me," he reveals. True to form, his love of fusion and sense of the guitar as the perfect means of expression remain central to his art. "While I know the energy level in straight jazz can be very intense, there is so much intensity in fusion," he offers. "The guitar is the perfect vehicle if you love exploratory music. We're dealing with 12 notes in the Western musical tradition, and maybe a few bent ones as well, but the guitar has the ability to exceed those inherent limitations. I think in some ways modern instrumental metal is the new version of fusion. Once upon a time there was the 'jazz committee' who would decide what jazz should be or what would be rock, but that all got blurred by fusion. Today's world is a perfect example of the genre. The whole world is interconnected. The pandemic proved that."



Playing a Roland G-303 Synth Controller at the JVC Capital Jazz Festival in London, 1988

Playing a Gibson L-5 onstage in 1980

DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (1980); BRIAN O'CONNOR/JAZZ SERVICES/HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (1988)

CAPTAIN FINGERS
CAPTAIN FINGERS (1977)

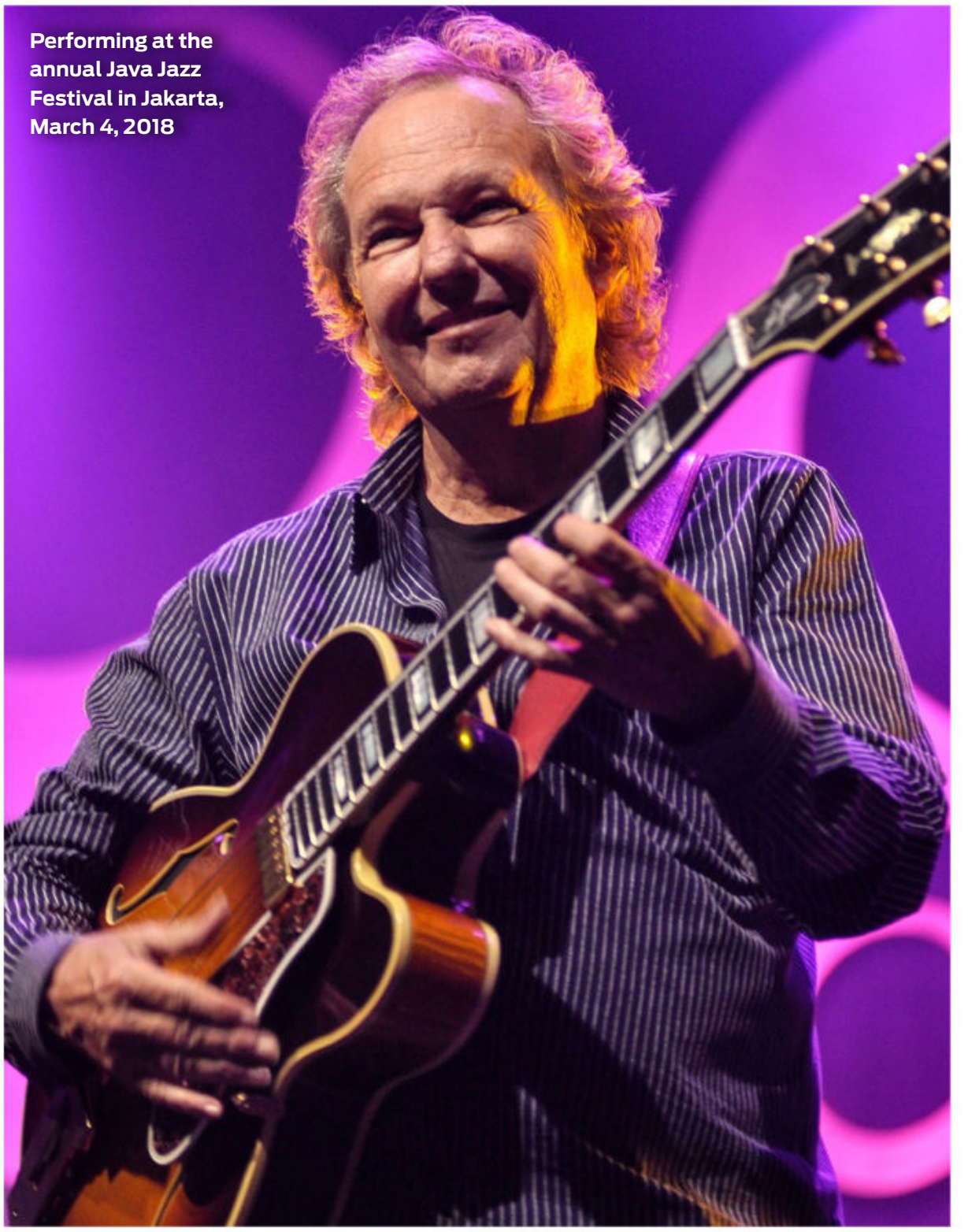
"This track had a combo of chops and technique, which were a big part of fusion, but it also had a great groove, and not too many people had that. When this album came out, I think it captured a lot of my personality and showed that I did have a distinctive voice as a guitarist. It's still not an easy tune to play, even to this day; it wasn't just fast for the sake of it. It would have been recorded with my ES-335 into a Fender amp, a Deluxe Reverb maybe, but Paul Rivera was doing a lot of mods to amps back then, so he probably worked on that one. Actually, I had a very early version of the Mesa/Boogie at that time, so that may have been part of the sound. That era was the first time that rock guitar and jazz guitar started to be lumped into fusion. It was a boom time for the fusion guitar movement. The first time I heard Mahavishnu with John McLaughlin, I was like 'Damn!' [*laughs*] I was also impressed by guys like Bill Connors, and of course no one could figure out what Allan Holdsworth was doing. I guess if Hendrix had a career that had endured, he could well have been doing great stuff in fusion."

"YOU HAVE TO BE VERY WARY ABOUT THE FACT THAT EVERYBODY HAS AMAZING TECHNIQUE"

MORNING GLORY
THE CAPTAIN'S JOURNEY (1978)

"This was the first tune I wrote that really got a lot of attention, not only from other guitar players but also from fans and other artists, some of whom wanted to write lyrics to it. I recorded this version in 1978, and I actually revisited it on *Dreamcatcher*. Harmonically, rhythmically and melodically, it really defined who I was as an artist because I'd been so versatile as a studio player that I had to find my own identity, as every guitarist does. I always say the key to finding who you are is to compose, and 'Morning Glory' is a good example of that. I think it really helped me home in on what my 'thing' was.

"I wrote this tune, and Eric Gale, an artist I really admired at the time, covered it [*on his 1977 album* Multiplication]. Then Bill Champlin put the vocal on. I remember playing at the Roxy in L.A. with my band, and as soon as I started to play 'Morning Glory,' it got a strong reaction from the crowd. You don't have to be



Performing at the annual Java Jazz Festival in Jakarta, March 4, 2018

some kind of scientist to work out that if something is really connecting with a crowd, as 'Morning Glory' did, you're onto something valuable."

NIGHT RHYTHMS/ HARLEQUIN

LEE RITENOUR, *FESTIVAL* (1988)/DAVE GRUSIN AND LEE RITENOUR, *HARLEQUIN* (1985)

"I wanted to pick two tracks to kind of stand as one, because they reflect my deep love of Brazilian music, There is a lot of Brazilian influence on *Festival*. At the time that I recorded it, I'd started hanging out with my soon-to-be wife, who is Brazilian, and she was doing a big project in New York at the same time. She had a lot of amazing Brazilian artists coming to it. That lit a fire under me, and it started me working on music that reflected that Brazilian influence. This song became a signature sound for me, and I still hear it all the time on digital radio.

"The *Harlequin* album was also very Brazilian influenced. Dave Grusin has been a longtime collaborator for me. I met him when I was 18, and he was such a prolific composer for TV and film. I heard about him from his scores; he'd have Howard Roberts blowing over these really long chase scenes. I met him through Sérgio Mendes, and soon after that he started hiring me for some of the shows. The rest is history. We've been friends for about 50 years now."

STOLEN MOMENTS

STOLEN MOMENTS (1990)

"This was a very traditional jazz album for me. I pulled out my '49 Gibson L-5 that I'd had since I was a teenager. A lot of people didn't know I had that traditional jazz background — the whole Blue Note thing — as the sessions and solo albums that I'd done previously weren't in that style, of course. People knew I had the fusion and Brazilian things going on, but at the heart of everything I do is my love for jazz.

"We did this album direct to two-track. It only took two days to record it at Sunset Sound studios in L.A., which is my favorite studio. It was recorded for JVC in Japan originally. There were so many excellent musicians that played on that record with me. I always loved this Oliver Nelson tune, and I feel that the album holds up really well when I listen back to it. The studio has such a beautiful vibe. I plugged the L-5 into a Fender Deluxe, but again one that had been modified by Paul Rivera."

LAY IT DOWN

6 STRING THEORY (2010)

"There is a lot more blues in a lot of my playing on this album, and this track was a wonderful duet with John Scofield. The two guitars really complement each other. I think something about his playing influenced me into a more bluesy direction. The whole album was a dream project, working with so many great guitar players. I'd never done anything like it before.

"When I first put the project together, I knew it was going to be an expensive album, so I thought I'd go to a few guys that I trusted the most, and if they said that they wanted to do it, then I knew it would be viable. Those guys were Steve Lukather, who I've known since he was a teenager, and he immediately said yeah. B.B. King was the other one that I called. I had a long relationship with B.B. I used to play rhythm on his records, and there was a double album that was sponsored by *Guitar Player* way back that I appeared on with him. I met him when I was 19, and we were friends ever since. The third guy I went to was George Benson. After he agreed, I started to branch out into a whole bunch of newer guys, like Andy McKee and Joe Bonamassa. We all wanted to make a great record. Nobody wanted to show off."

"A LOT OF PEOPLE DIDN'T KNOW I HAD THAT TRADITIONAL JAZZ BACKGROUND — THE WHOLE BLUE NOTE THING"

OEDAY ABDULLAH/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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Sword Play

The Music Man Sabre I was a sound sculptor that could cut like a knife.

SINCE ITS ACQUISITION by Ernie Ball in 1984, Music Man has released an impressive number of star-endorsed models and attained a firm standing among the ranks of highly regarded, U.S.-made electric guitars. Such was the intention of the company when it was founded in the 1970s, even if it didn't entirely go that way at first. Details of Music Man's early history, including ownership, design credits and who made what, remain confusing to many, and have occasionally been misrepresented over the years, but it's not too hard to untangle the basic threads of how this groundbreaking Sabre I guitar came to be, well before Ernie Ball was in the picture.

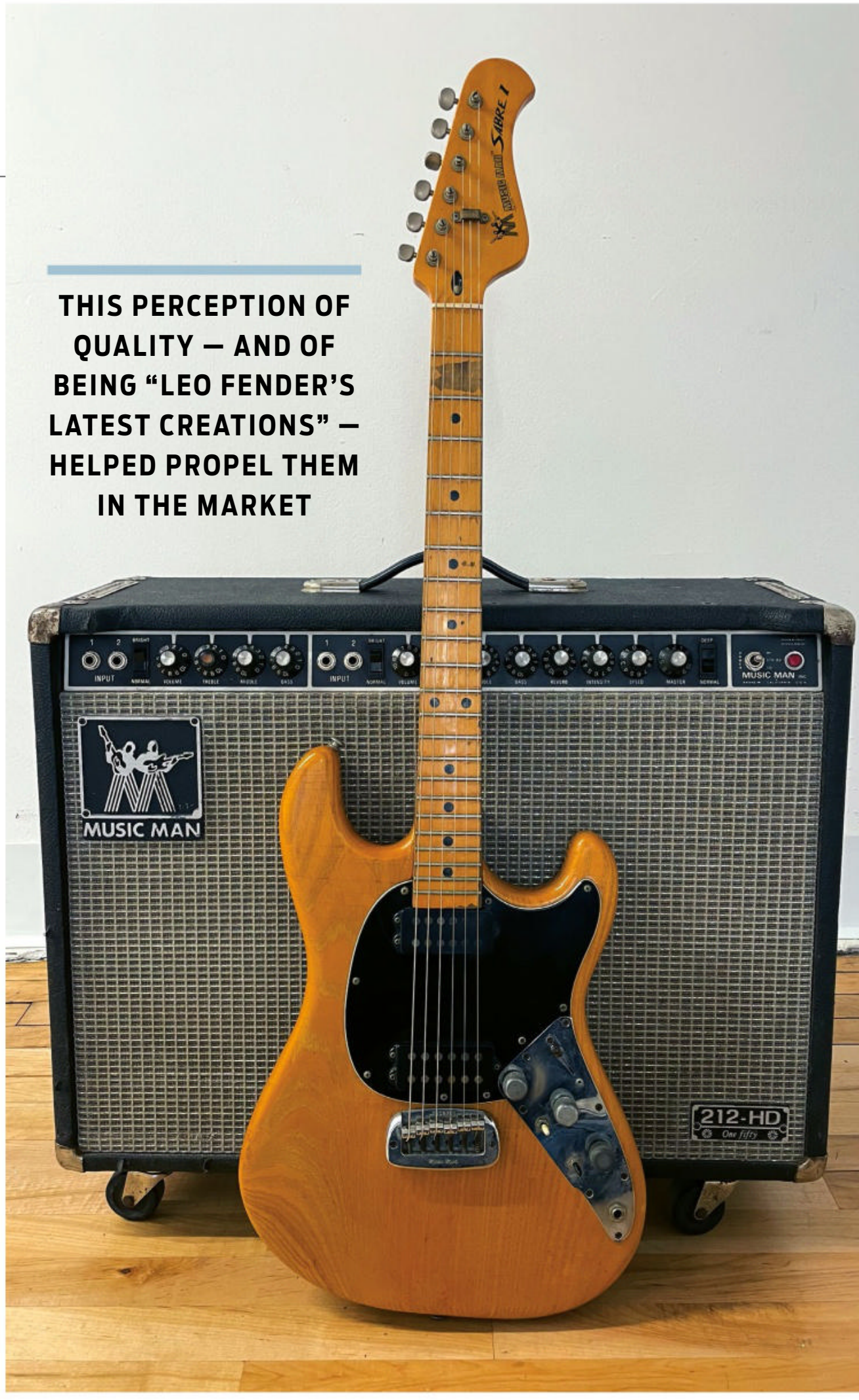
When discussing Music Man's early history, what grabs most guitar fanatics' attention is Leo Fender's involvement. In fact, the origins of the workshop that built these guitars goes back even further than the founding of Music Man, and dates directly to Leo's stealthy post-Fender endeavors.

After selling the Fender Electric Instrument Co. to CBS at the end of '64 and turning over the keys in early '65, Leo was bound to a 10-year noncompete clause. But if he couldn't manufacture and sell his own competing products, there was nothing wrong with developing ideas for future use, so in 1966 he founded CLF Research (for Clarence Leo Fender) for just that purpose.

In 1971, Fender's former associates Tom Walker and Forrest White founded Tri-Sonic, which, after briefly operating as Musitek, changed its name to Music Man In 1974. That same year, the first Music Man amplifiers hit the market, and in 1975, with the expiration of his restrictions from the CBS deal, Leo came onboard as president.

While Walker's branch of the operation was responsible for the amplifiers from the mid to late '70s, CLF made the guitars. The StingRay guitar and bass were introduced in 1976, and the Sabre followed another year or so after. The two six-string guitars grabbed some attention when they hit the market, but the uptake among professional musicians wasn't much to write home about. The StingRay bass — whether by fluke or by intention — seemed to have been perfectly conceived for emerging sounds of the day and was an overnight success. Legend has it Leo was designing his guitars and basses to be brighter and brighter through the '60s and '70s, largely because he was becoming hard of hearing. As a result, some players found the instruments a little harsh and shrill, but the StingRay bass landed just in time to ride the wave of bright, snappy slap-bass styles prominent in funk and disco of the era, and it became a latter-day classic as a result.

Music Man guitars and basses were arguably better made than the Fenders of the mid to late '70s, and this perception of quality — and of being "Leo Fender's latest creations"



THIS PERCEPTION OF QUALITY — AND OF BEING "LEO FENDER'S LATEST CREATIONS" — HELPED PROPEL THEM IN THE MARKET

BY DAVE HUNTER

— helped propel them in the market. Music Man released the original Sabre I and Sabre II models around late 1977 and offered them until 1980 or so.

Other than the clearly Fender-derived body and headstock shapes, CLF engineering touchstones are seen in the three-bolt neck attachment with hex-key tilt adjustment point, and the "bullet" truss-rod adjustment nut at the headstock end. These had already become the calling cards of the less-loved Fender Stratocasters of the '70s, but Leo was sticking with their veracity from a design standpoint, and they arguably made more sense on entirely new makes and models.

Otherwise, major innovations were found in the dual humbucking pickups; an onboard preamp that offered independent active bass, treble and volume controls, a bright switch, a phase switch, and a low-impedance output; and a patented new bridge design with a sustain-enhancing brass base and individually adjustable saddles. The pickups were narrower than traditional Gibson humbuckers to allow more picking room, and the neck and bridge units were made different lengths to position the pole pieces more precisely beneath the strings. All that, and the Sabre came in two models, although only the necks were different: the I, seen here, had jumbo frets and a 12-inch fingerboard radius for contemporary rock players, and the II had narrower frets and a 7.5-inch radius "for comfortable, untiring, country-style fingering," as the ads of the day stated.

Notable early Music Man guitarists are thin on the ground compared to the stars — including Pino Palladino, Flea, Cliff Williams and Kim Deal — who played the StingRay bass. German guitarist Carl Carlton played a StingRay guitar with Vitesse in the late '70s before joining Mink DeVille and, later, Carl Palmer and Eric Burdon and the Animals. Alex Weir wielded white- and natural-finished Sabre I examples with the Brothers Johnson in the '70s and then with *Stop Making Sense*–era Talking Heads, as seen in the Jonathan Demme–directed 1984 concert film of the same name.

If you lay your hands on a late-'70s Sabre, be aware that the active electronics and powerful, bright-leaning humbuckers can lead to harsh sounds when used injudiciously. But when used right, those same features allow everything from snappy funk and jangle for rhythm work to warm, rich, meaty girth for rock chunk and solos. It's a powerful sound sculptor, and needs to be treated as such.

Leo Fender severed his Music Man connections around 1980 or so, and shortly after co-founded G&L with George Fullerton. Still keen on many of the design ideas he'd brought to the Music Man guitars, he ported several signature touches over to the early G&L efforts. Check out an early G&L F-100, for example, and you'll find similar humbucking pickups, nearly identical active electronics, and the Leo-certified three-bolt neck attachment and "bullet" truss-rod nut.

String-and-accessories maker Ernie Ball took over Music Man in 1984 and spearheaded changes that helped the company live up to its potential. The amps were dropped, but a new guitar and bass lineup, improved quality control and a long list of star endorsements — including Edward Van Halen, Steve Morse, Keith Richards, Albert Lee, Steve Lukather and many others — were added, helping to ensure Music Man's place in the pantheon of pro-grade electric-guitar makers.

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- > Solid ash body reminiscent of the Fender Stratocaster
- > 25.5" scale length
- > Maple neck with maple fingerboard, 12" radius, attached to body with three wood screws
- > Two Music Man humbucking pickups
- > Inset solid-brass bridge base with six adjustable saddles
- > Active electronics with independent treble and bass controls, bright and phase-reverse switches

GUITAR COURTESY OF PTD UNLIMITED VINTAGE, PHOTOS BY JOHN O'BRIEN

BY JIM CAMPILONGO

Lake Effect

The late Pat Martino took a stirring voyage on fusion's treacherous waters.

PAT MARTINO'S *JOYOUS LAKE* was released on Warner Bros. Records in 1976. Along with Pat, its alumni includes Delmar Brown on electric piano, Mark Leonard on bass and Kenwood Dennard on drums and percussion, and it's a terrific lineup. I first heard the album on KRE, the Bay Area AM radio jazz station that exposed me to hundreds of artists and their works, including Julian Priester's *Love, Love*, Bobby Hutcherson's "Houston St. Thursday Afternoon" and Pat Martino's *Joyous Lake*.

The opening track, "Line Games," basically says it all: athletic impassioned playing, almost impossible unison lines, and yes, one could use the F word — *fusion* — to describe it accurately. Pat always had a unique guitar sound that wasn't really jazz or rock; it was simply Pat Martino. He always fused together something that was exciting and original. He tears it up on "Line Games," my favorite track on the LP. The Delmar Brown composition "Pyramid Vision" follows with a sound like a stormy wind, before a lovely melody played by Pat brings us indoors. While Kenwood Dennard borders on unhinged, he never comes close to derailing but instead righteously energizes the music.

Side one closes with "Mardi Gras," a track that reminds me of a pre-Jaco Weather Report tune. It begins with fusion funk but enters a thoroughfare of melody that is timeless. Pat's guitar solo sound on this track is the most "plugged into an amp" of all the album's songs, and of course he plays masterfully. I love when he does his 16th-note triplets thing. I can't get enough.

Side two opens with the Dennard composition "M'Wandishi," and while it might be pushing my fusion calorie limit, it's sincere and trippy. His composition "Song Bird" follows, delivering more impossible ensemble parts before settling into a vamp where Pat's guitar testifies successfully. The "Song Bird" MVP award goes to keyboardist Brown, whose comping is sublime. The LP's closer, "Joyous Lake," slams into us gently and revisits some of the territory discovered on "Line Games."

PAT ALWAYS HAD A UNIQUE GUITAR SOUND THAT WASN'T REALLY JAZZ OR ROCK; IT WAS SIMPLY PAT MARTINO.

There was a fusion "golden age" (at least for my generation) that included Allan Holdsworth with the New Tony Williams Lifetime, Return to Forever, Bill Connors' solo LPs, John Abercrombie, Jon-Luc Ponty, John McLaughlin, Weather Report, Miles Davis, Stanley Clarke with Jeff Beck, and Billy Cobham with Tommy Bolin, to name a few. I always revisit this era of fusion. I don't think I took it for granted back then, but the music is almost more impressive to me today. All these artists were knocking down walls. Their music strikes me as more ambitious than what anyone expected, displaying an almost impossible athleticism that required a loving, focused dedication. They were stretching boundaries without the distractions of commerciality. Pat Martino delivered all that, and his artistry is captured in spades on *Joyous Lake*.

On Monday, November 1, 2021, I emailed my buddy Ilkka Rantamaki, who resides in Finland. I mentioned a tour where we drove dozens of hours while listening to Pat Martino's *Desperado* album literally nonstop for days. Ten minutes after sending that email, I was told Pat had passed away on that very day. Despite his passing, he hasn't left me, and I would have written about *Joyous Lake* eventually. It's the Pat Martino record closest to my heart and possibly his most realized LP. But now I wish I'd written about it sooner. Pat gave me a lot. Thank you, Mr. Martino, for everything.

Jim Campilongo has 14 critically acclaimed instrumental records available on vinyl, CD and digital download at jimcampilongo.com.

BY TERRY CARLETON

Switched-On Box

With its range of tones and innovative features, the Teisco Spectrum 5 will push your buttons.

MANY COLLECTIBLE ODDBALL guitars are dubbed Holy Grailer. This month, I'm going to revisit one of the best by Teisco and share the journey I've been on for the past 15 years or so that I've owned it. The Spectrum Five was different from Teisco's typical 1960s output. As is well known, the Japanese company was among the Asian and European guitar makers that brought odd shapes and innovative electronics to the U.S. market during that decade. But while Teisco and its late-'60s parent company, Kawai, were saturating department stores with entry-level guitars under a myriad of nameplates, they came to believe their newfound market share might put them in a position to compete with the Gibsons and Fenders of the day. That's where the Spectrum Five comes in.

WEIRDO FACTOR

As the Teisco catalog explained, the Spectrum 5 moniker refers to the five basic color tones that are produced by its five self-canceling switches, whose sounds range from bass to treble. Any combination of switches can be pressed, allowing a wide range of tonal colors. On top of that, the guitar has a true stereo output courtesy of the split pickup design and two separate output jacks. The surface-mount vibrato unit is singularly unique, as it attaches to the bridge with two strips of tensile-strength metal that allow them to move as one, eliminating friction over the saddles.

PLAYABILITY AND SOUND

It took years for me to learn just how great this model plays and sounds. When I got my 1967 model Spectrum, the tuners, knobs, logos and bridge cover were missing. My 10-year hunt turned up the absent parts and, after getting the neck steamed, straightened and refretted, the guitar is now as amazing as the day it came from the factory.

The only drawback to the Spectrum's vast variety of tones is remembering what combo of buttons produced them. Some sound super bright and sparkly when used clean, while others sound amazing with distortion. And you'll have a hard time matching them with any other guitar. Kawai made perfect reissues in the early '90s, but they're as hard to find as the originals. Other reissues by Ikebe in the '90s and, most recently, Eastwood look like the originals but don't offer the variety of tones.

The 22-fret neck has a zero fret and feels downright sexy. It's thin, tapered and super fast. Its slender dimensions forced Teisco to build it from five plies of super-dense ebony to prevent warping. The fingerboard is also made from ebony and features groovy markers. As for the body, it's made from one piece of solid mahogany sculpted into a German-style carved top, and treated to seven coats of lacquer. The binding is a sort of herringbone affair with four thin parallel lines in black and white.

VALUE

I bought my Spectrum 5 for a whopping 600 bucks, a princely sum, considering that it had been essentially stripped. Today, '60s models are fetching up to $5,000, and '90s reissues are going for about half that; the 2015 Ikebe reissues, though almost identical to the originals in shape and function, don't offer quite the same tonal range as the originals. The Eastwood Spectrum 5 PRO, available for around $1,500, is super cool, but the pickups sound more Fender-y to me, while the bridge and tremolo are more like what you'd see on a Fender Jaguar.

WHY IT RULES

The Teisco Spectrum 5 sounds unique, plays tremendously well, looks cool look and has all the tones you need to get through a gig. Better still, it will never bore you.

Thanks to Paul Connet, Mike Fox and EZPZ Mike.

Got a whack job? Feel free to get in touch with me at rtcarleton@gmail.com. Who knows? Maybe I'll write about it.

PHOTO BY MAY YAM

SHOUT IT OUT LOUD

It took four albums for **Kiss** to rise from Rust Belt cult act to national rock stars. Now the pressure was on for a follow-up. They responded with *Destroyer*, the 1976 album that turned the New York City glam-rockers into Gods of Thunder.

BY DANTE BONUTTO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL PUTLAND AND FIN COSTELLO/GETTY IMAGES

MICHAEL PUTLAND

EVERY LONG-RUNNING BAND has its defining album, a creation that emerges from a seemingly perfect convergence of creative forces. For the Beatles it was *Sgt. Peppers' Lonely Hearts Club Band*. For the Rolling Stones it was *Exile on Main Street*. Numerous other examples abound, from the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* to Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*.

For Kiss, the magic arrived on *Destroyer*, an album on which the forces didn't combine as much as they cascaded forth like a fountain of stage blood. Coming after the clunky opening trio of *Kiss*, *Hotter Than Hell* and *Dressed to Kill*, 1976's *Destroyer* was the studio follow-up on which the New York City glam rockers fine tuned their mix of brawny rock and roll and theatricality into a musical vision that was both sonic and cinematic in its scope. Yes, it has the hits, including "Detroit Rock City," "Shout It Out Loud," "Gods of Thunder," "Flaming Youth" and "Beth," but *Destroyer* has something more: a cohesiveness of sound and vision — amid a sonic collage that includes choir, orchestra and keyboards — that in 1976 elevated Kiss to the ranks of rock and roll gods. To many fans, it was and remains their greatest achievement.

"*KISS ALIVE!* HAD ALL THE MUSCLE AND THE SPIT. BOB REPLACED THAT WITH A CINEMATIC FEEL — A LARGER PICTURE OF WHO WE WERE"

Although the album's anniversary has been celebrated before — witness 2012's *Destroyer: Resurrected*, on which producer Bob Ezrin sweetened and amended the production — Kiss have gone all out with the new *Destroyer 45th Anniversary Super-Deluxe Edition*. Comprising four CDs, a Blu-ray audio surround-sound disc mixed by Steve Wilson, a 68-page hardcover book and numerous collectibles — including a replica 1976 Kiss Army Kit — it's a celebratory box every true fan will rush to own. Best of all, it offers a total of 73 tracks, 48 of which are previously unreleased. Bear in mind, the completed album had a mere 10 songs, including the hidden closing track, "Rock and Roll Party."

But just what was it that inspired Kiss to such heights some three studio albums into their career? Remarkably, it was their first live album, *Kiss Alive!*, released one year earlier. The album had been a runaway success, giving the band its first smash hit.

"You know how McDonald's have a sign that ticks over every time they sell another burger?" guitarist Paul Stanley asks. "*Kiss Alive!* was like that for us. We went from 70,000 sales to a million sales, and it just kept going."

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS

For America's most flamboyant sons, *Kiss Alive!* was a genuine education, proving in Gold and Platinum currency that the appeal of the band was based on more than just music. Which is not to devalue the studio recordings from 1974 to '75, as some of the most popular Kiss songs ever were put to tape in that period, including the chart hit "Rock and Roll All Nite." Think of it like this: If *Kiss*, *Hotter Than Hell* and *Dressed to Kill* were the foreplay, the whisper in the ear and the hand on the thigh, then *Kiss Alive!*

was the moment when the passion finally peaked. It was all there: the heaving and the humping, the solos and the raps… the whole nine yards.

"*Kiss Alive!* was what we stood for," Stanley affirms, "the embodiment and the magnification of everything we were as a band. It was Kiss on steroids."

For Stanley, Gene Simmons, Peter Criss and Ace Frehley, the pressure was well and truly on. Achieving success is one thing; following it up is another. If *Kiss Alive!* was to be a springboard, they couldn't afford to rest on their platform shoes. They returned to the studio — the Record Plant in New York — knowing that, however good their songs were, they needed a cheerleader and guru who would leave no stone unturned in the quest for musical greatness.

Enter producer Bob Ezrin.

"I'd first crossed paths with Bob up in Canada, where I was doing some promotion," Stanley recounts. "He asked me if I liked the sound of my own records, and because I was young and full of piss and vinegar, I said that I did.

"However, I was well aware of what he could do in the studio, of the work he'd done with Alice Cooper."

At Calderone Theater, Hempstead, New York, August 24, 1975. (from left) Gene Simmons, Peter Criss, Paul Stanley and Ace Frehley

Ezrin had first joined forces with the Alice Cooper Band for their 1971 album *Love It to Death*. "Which was cinematic and atmospheric, yet still totally rock and roll," Stanley continues. "His fingerprints are all over that stuff, so it was just a no-brainer that he should be our one and only choice for *Destroyer*."

In making their first three albums, Kiss had simply written the songs, then gone into the studio to record them before heading out on tour. It was a straightforward process, the way presumably every record was made… except that in Ezrin's world, there was a little thing called "pre-production" that had to be factored in. It was a first-time experience for Kiss, who must have suddenly felt like they were back at school.

"Actually, brutal boot camp was more like it," Stanley says, wincing. "Bob definitely had a whistle round his neck. At the time, of course, we were basking in the glory of our success with *Kiss Alive!*, and we weren't exactly open to outside opinion. But we listened to him because he was, well, right! With Bob, it was 'Teach us!' "

OPPOSITE: Onstage at the Hammersmith Odeon, London, May 16, 1976

BELOW: Stanley at Cobo Hall, Detroit, May 16, 1975

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS

Three years later, Ezrin would be in the studio with David Gilmour, Roger Waters et al helming the Pink Floyd classic *The Wall*, so the Kiss camp can at least reflect with pride that they put their faith in a hit maker. But it wasn't a decision they reveled in at the time. Not only did the Toronto-born taskmaster insist that they tune their own instruments — he also arranged them in a circle, Alcoholics Anonymous style, going through the material with an attention to detail usually reserved for military maneuvers.

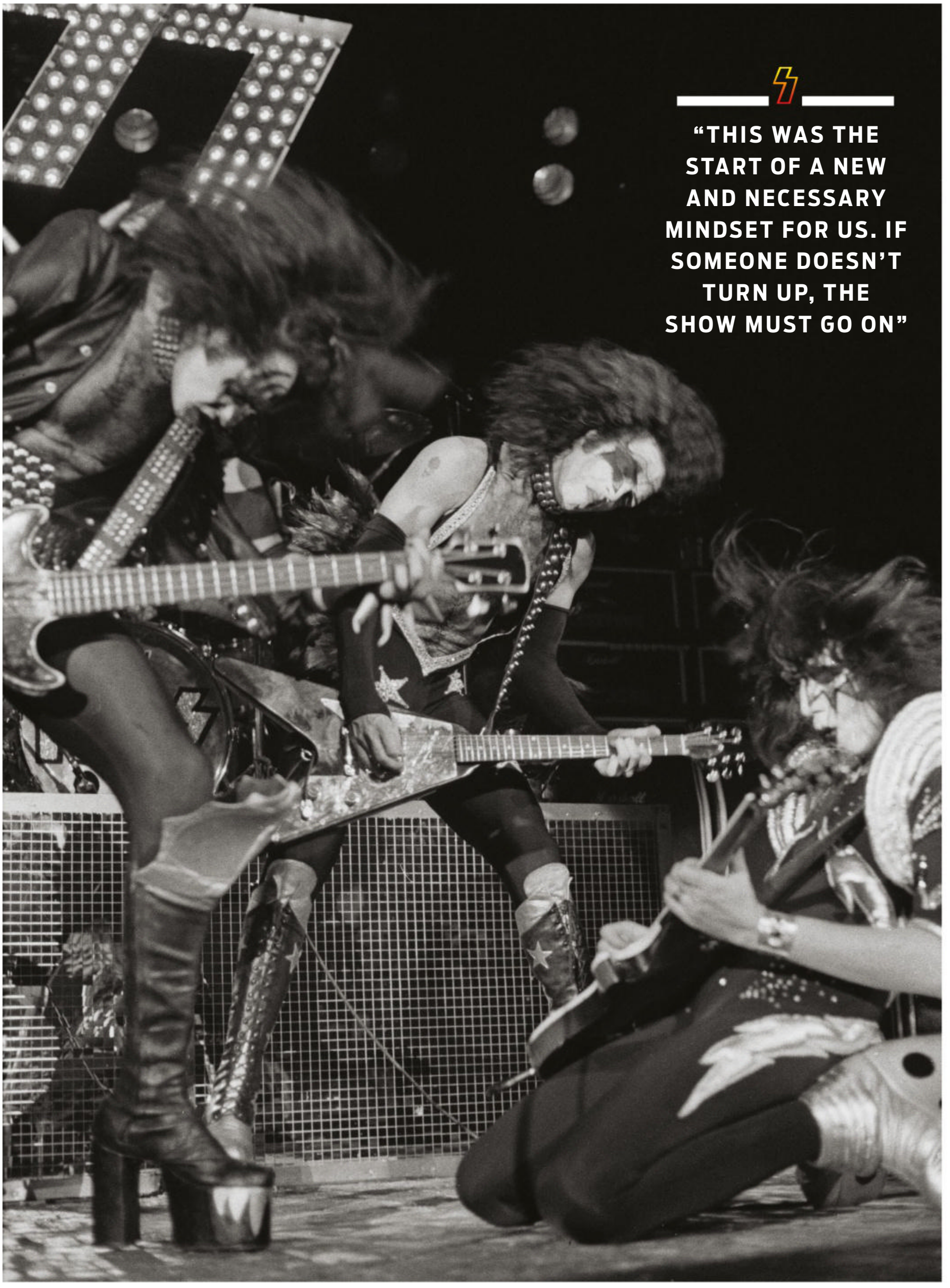
"Sometimes he'd ask for most of the band to leave the rehearsal space so he could focus in on a particular person," Stanley recalls. "He might want to run through the drum beat to 'Detroit Rock City' with Peter, or maybe talk to Gene about the song's bass part, which incidentally is based on Curtis Mayfield's 'Freddie's Dead' [*from the soundtrack to the 1972 movie* Superfly]. The rehearsals were long, but they were exciting. And it wasn't just the music he was pushing us on; it was the lyrics too. The 'fuck me' songs were out."

While most of the material was pieced together in the circle, with choruses, verses and bridges run up the flagpole in the hope of an Ezrin salute, a couple of Stanley songs were nearly in the can. "God of Thunder" was, to all intents and purposes, complete, while "Detroit Rock City" had a solid chorus but was still seeking a theme.

The song's turning point came when Stanley remembered a show in North Carolina where, tragically, a fan had been killed by a car outside the venue. Straight away, Ezrin saw it could be the meat of the tune. He set about encouraging Stanley to complete the lyric, the end result being the story of a kid who hears about his own demise on the radio. (And despite what you may have read on the internet, Gene doesn't voice the part of the radio reporter in the track's intro.)

The choice of Detroit for the song's setting was no arbitrary thing. It was the city that gave Kiss a boost early on. Though known primarily for Motown, the Motor City is a rock and roll town — witness acts like Bob Seger, Grand Funk, the MC5, Ted Nugent and the Stooges — and it embraced the group on its first tours. For that matter, when performing at the city's Cobo Hall on January 26, 1976, Stanley introduced "Rock and Roll All Nite" as a song written in and for Detroit. Given the band's relationship with the city, it was only natural to spotlight it in the title of Stanley's new rocker. But in many ways, "Detroit Rock City" is about every place that likes to shake loose.

"God of Thunder," meanwhile, would prove to be a double-edged sword for the man known as the



“THIS WAS THE START OF A NEW AND NECESSARY MINDSET FOR US. IF SOMEONE DOESN’T TURN UP, THE SHOW MUST GO ON”

MICHAEL PUTLAND

THE SPACEMAN'S RETURN VOYAGE

Back on the road, Ace Frehley is still struttin' and smokin'.

BY JAMES VOLPE ROTONDI

SINCE ACE FREHLEY'S first departure from Kiss in 1980, the band's lead guitar chair has been held down by many capable, creative players, including Vinnie Vincent, Bruce Kulick, Mark St. John, and, its occupant since 2002, former Black 'N Blue guitar slinger Tommy Thayer. But if those players have served the band nobly, and even contributed a few fan favorites to Kiss's repertoire — Kulick's work on 1992's *Revenge* is particularly noteworthy — the band's melodic, hooky lead guitar legacy was framed, built, established and given enduring wings by one man: the inimitable Paul Daniel "Ace" Frehley, a.k.a. the Spaceman.

"Y'know, I can remember as a kid hearing Eric Clapton interviewed, talking about his solo on Cream's 'Sunshine of Your Love,'" recalls the 70-year-old Frehley, fresh from a soundcheck with his recently reinvigorated Ace Frehley Band (see "Enter the Talismen," page 39). "And Clapton said the solo on that song was basically the melody from Elvis's 'Blue Moon.' I clearly remember him saying that the best and most memorable solos are the ones you can hum. I never forgot that, and that's stayed with me my whole life."

He's not the only one it stayed with: Entire generations of players — while simultaneously pledging allegiance to Frehley's idols, like Clapton, Jimmy Page and Pete Townshend ("the master of chordal work") — were equally inspired by Ace's savvy synthesis of bluesy bends, wicked triplet licks and smart chord-specific note choices that always stuck to the chordal skeleton of the track, never devolving into what Frank Zappa famously called "spoo."

Ace onstage with Talismen (from left) Ryan Cook and Philip Shouse

Not that it was an exercise in quantum physics for Frehley, a spontaneous player who doesn't speak the language of minor-sixths and the Mixolydian mode, however much he may actually play those very things. "You take the whole extended after-solo on 'She," from *Kiss Alive!*," he explains. "I mean, I'm just having fun there. It was always about having fun for me." A little too much fun at times, admits Frehley, who practically lived at Studio 54 in its decadent heyday and has been proudly sober for the last decade and a half.

And while Ace's original solos and riffs may have helped launch a thousand hair metal and grunge guitarists, he wasn't above a little, um, creative borrowing himself, the main solo on 'She' being a prime example. "I stole the 'She' solo from Robby Krieger of the Doors!" Frehley confesses. "I've got to give credit where credit is due." Indeed, the first eight bars of the "She" solo are a practically note-for-note swipe of Robby's iconic solo from the Doors' pounding 1968 album track "Five to One." "And you know the solo in 'Love Gun'?" he asks, as if anybody doesn't. "I stole that whole solo from the Blues Magoos' hit song 'We Ain't Got Nothing Yet.' Listen to it — you'll hear it!"

Not only does Frehley happily cop to the source of many of his best ideas, he has even built a few albums around it. His *Origins Vol. 1* (2016) and *Vol. 2* (2020) records are among the best of his career: raw, raucous and ripping covers of the '60s and '70s stuff that inspired the then 16-year-old Staten Island rawker: Leslie West's Mountain, Humble Pie, Deep Purple, Cream, Led Zeppelin, Hendrix, and more. "I was resistant to the idea at first," Frehley says, "but once I started working on those albums, I put my whole heart and soul into them."

Kiss fans invariably have their heart set on hearing iconic Ace moments, like the lightning licks in "God of Thunder" and the bursting Berry-bends on "Shout It Out Loud," both from 1976's *Destroyer*. But Ace has his own favorites, too: "I also love the solo in 'Strange Ways,' [Hotter Than Hell] and I love the solo in '100,000 Years,' [Kiss] as well as the solo I played in 'Deuce,'" he says, with pride. "Those are all the classic Ace solos that come to mind off the top of my head."

A bit further afield, though, are cool, more unexpected moments you might not associate with Kiss's raw and unruly approach. There's the downright experimental stippling and sound effects on *Rock and Roll Over*'s "Almost Human"; *Destroyer*'s "King of the Nighttime World" solo, where Mayfield-approved R&B rhythm licks give way to furious post-Blackmore pick attacks; or *Dressed to Kill*'s "Love Her All I Can," a funky up-tempo groove machine over which Ace lets fly with flange-y southern rock triplets, and moves into a wicked series of motivic move-over-Trower quintuplet licks.

And no assessment of Ace's lead work would be complete without the titanic Gorham/Robertson–style natural minor harmony lead in D♭ (technically C, but Kiss always tuned down a half-step in their

JEFF HAHNE/GETTY IMAGES

halcyon days) on *Destroyer*'s "Detroit Rock City." To this day, though, you can hear a slight shrug in Ace's voice when he explains how producer Bob Ezrin essentially sang him the melody and harmony for the epic lead break in "Detroit Rock City." But really, so what?

Sometimes guitar playing is about coming up with the perfect part; sometimes it's about executing the perfect part. The D-flat Aeolian/Harmonic Minor–based solo to "Detroit Rock City" kicks ass because it's a great melody, performed by Ace with a wicked tone, slick slides and pull-offs, a cool harmony in thirds, and a ton of attitude. "Ezrin always did say I was the most rock and roll guy in the band," Frehley says with a smile.

Gibson Les Pauls have been essential to that stance ever since. On his recent U.S. tour with his old friend Alice Cooper, Frehley leaned on his sunburst, three-pickup Gibson 1959 replica Ace Frehley Les Paul Custom Signature model; his famous black 1978 Les Paul Standard that was later routed for a middle pickup, and a three-pickup illuminated "Light Guitar" Les Paul modified by noted boutique luthier Jim Cara. The obvious irony here? Ace never uses the middle pickup. Or the neck pickup. "The bridge pickup really is my tone, completely," he confesses.

Those bridge pups, says his longtime tech Rocco Monterosso, generally include a DiMarzio Air Zone or the Tone Zone humbucker, underneath a set of D'Addario EXL120 Nickel-Wound 009–.042s, struck with Dunlop Medium picks. From there, Ace's sound hits a Shure Axient AD4D wireless unit, followed by a modest pedal drawer: a TC Electronic PolyTune, an Xotic Labs EP Booster and a Line 6 DL4 Delay Modeler — used almost exclusively on "Rock Soldiers," "Shock Me," and a slap-effect on "Detroit Rock City" — and straight into a 100-watt Marshall JCM2000 Dual Super Lead, paired with a Marshall 1960AV cab loaded with Celestion Vintage 30s. The Marshall's effects loop passes through an MXR Custom Audio MC401 Boost/Line Driver and a TC Electronic Hall of Fame Reverb for a little extra space for Ace.

"I CLEARLY REMEMBER CLAPTON SAYING THE BEST AND MOST MEMORABLE SOLOS ARE THE ONES YOU CAN HUM. I NEVER FORGOT THAT"

So the obvious question is: Why have a middle pickup at all if you never even use it? Oh, ye of little faith — this is the Spaceman we're talking about here, people! That middle pickup cavity contains the open end of a hidden tube that passes through the guitar from the routed-out large cavity on the back. In that cavity, Velcro'd to the guitar, lives the current secret to Ace's legendary — nay, mythical — "smoking Les Paul" stage routine, which he performs during an unaccompanied solo following the *Love Gun* song "Shock Me."

"I used to just use actual smoke bombs for years," Ace explains, "but that can be a little complicated and dangerous. So for the last 10 years or so, I've been using these mini fog machines called Tiny FX [*by Look Solutions*]. They run off lithium batteries, and they use the same fogger liquid you see in the really big stage smokers. It's crazy shit!"

Which, if you've spent any time following the career of Ace Frehley over the years, is pretty much par for the course.

"Look, there's no rhyme or reason to why anything happens, as far as I'm concerned," Ace says cheerfully. "I believe we live in some kind of matrix and it's all being controlled by some master computer. Somewhere out there, God's pulling the strings and playing the whole thing... on a keyboard!"

DOVE SHORE

18+

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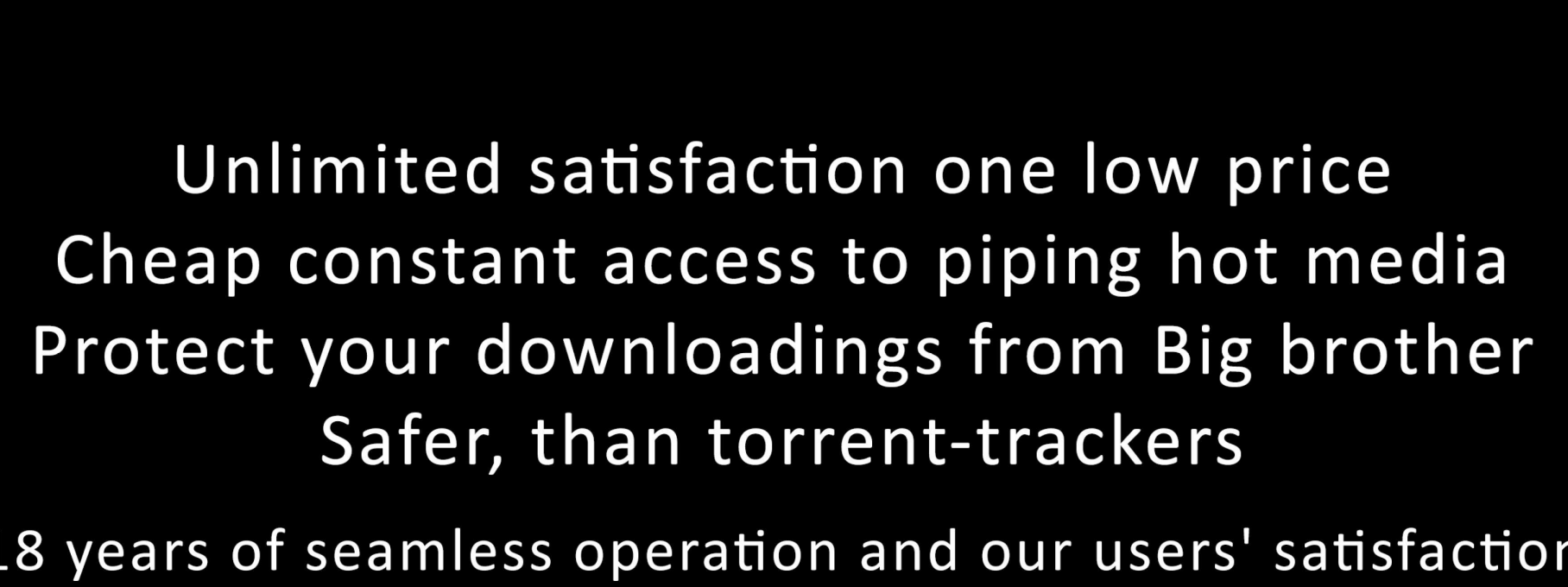

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Starchild. It was a great song, no doubt, but one Stanley had written for himself. "When Bob said Gene should take the lead vocal, I just couldn't believe it," he says, still sounding surprised. "That's the thing about working with a real producer; he can keep the band focused by assuming control, and that's generally a good thing… apart from when he disagrees with me.

"BOB SANG THAT SOLO SECTION NOTE FOR NOTE, THEN ASKED ACE TO LEARN IT. INCLUDING THE HARMONY"

"Of course, it was absolutely the right call, but it was hard for me to appreciate the logic at the time. I was speechless."

And it wasn't just Simmons who made his presence felt on the song — Ezrin's young sons David and Josh were given a "big moment" too, providing the eerie-sounding vocals that stoke up the atmosphere. "They were wearing little space helmets with walkie-talkies built into them," Stanley recalls, "and they were saying, 'I'm King Kong, I'm King Kong…' That's what you hear on the track."

"God of Thunder," of course, was destined to achieve great things, and swiftly became a signature tune for a man for whom breathing fire and spitting blood were already a way of life. That was the thing about *Destroyer* — it was a concept album, but only in the sense that the concept was Kiss itself. The tracks allowed the band members to further bond with the fans by exploring and expounding upon their individual personas.

"*Kiss Alive!* had all the muscle and the spit," Stanley explains, "but Bob replaced that with a cinematic feel. It was a night-and-day difference to what we'd done before, an altogether larger picture of who we were."

TOP: Ace backstage in 1976

BELOW: In the Record Plant with the Bronx Boys Choir, February 1976

Ezrin realized that turning these rock and roll heroes into rock and roll superheroes was the key to giving Kiss their biggest record to date, hence his insistence that Gene grab the mic for the self-trumpeting "God of Thunder." Musical vehicles were duly constructed for other members too.

In Stanley's case, it was "Do You Love Me?," a song co-written with producer/songwriter (and Runaways manager) Kim Fowley. "It's a song that deals with the age-old question, Do you like me for who I am or for what I have?" Stanley reflects. "But to be honest, I really didn't give a rat's ass. Back then, our lives were all about instant gratification. Commitment didn't really come into it. We were enjoying our success."

With Ezrin bringing the hammer down, there was little danger of filler creeping in below the radar, although the song that hovered closest to it was the tune selected for Criss: "Beth," a grandiose orchestral outing that has been described by experts in the field of soft rock as the "proto-power ballad." Penned by the drummer and his former Chelsea bandmate Stan Penridge, the song received a serious sprinkling of fairy dust from Ezrin. Its roots stretch back to the early 1970s, when it had the title "Beck," a name inspired by the girlfriend of Chelsea guitarist Mike Brand, who was forever on the phone while the band were in rehearsal. The title was tweaked to avoid confusion, and not only with Jeff Beck. "What's a Beck?!" Stanley asks, with a shrug. "It just wasn't a name that people could relate to."

Originally released as the B-side of "Detroit Rock City," the third single from *Destroyer*, "Beth" made an impact on radio as DJs flipped the seven-inch and gave it airplay. Soon after its release, the track received A-side status and charted at number seven,

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS (BOTH)

Ryan Spencer Cook

Jeremy Asbrock

Philip Shouse

ENTER THE TALISMEN

How Ryan Spencer Cook, Jeremy Asbrock and Philip Shouse gave Gene and Ace their grooves back.

BY JAMES VOLPE ROTONDI

NASHVILLE MAY BE known for country music, but when the band Blonder Than Hell, fronted by the golden-haired guitar duo Philip Shouse and Jeremy Asbrock, began their fully costumed annual holiday KISSmas tribute shows in 2010, it quickly became a Music City tradition. Shouse, who plays guitar for Wolf Marshall's Accept, and Asbrock — formerly of power-pop cult faves the Shazam! and an alum of John Corabi's band — were lifetime Kiss fans who knew even their more obscure songs inside and out.

So was their pal, former Hair of the Dog frontman Ryan Spencer Cook, whose Big Rock Show homage to '70s and '80s arena rock was a mainstay on the bill of the first several Kiss Kruises.

Still, none of the talented trio imagined that within a few years they'd become the guitar frontline of both Gene Simmons' and Ace Frehley's touring bands, in many cases playing alongside their childhood heroes in the very venues where they'd first seen Kiss as kids. "Yeah, it's pretty nuts!" says Cook, whom Simmons invited to lunch aboard the Kiss Kruise years ago to ask for help forming a band for what was meant to be a handful of corporate gigs. "I said to Gene, 'I know exactly who I'm going to call — you'll love these guys,'" Cook recalls. "And he did. And it all went so well that two or three gigs became two or three years — the first Gene Simmons solo tours ever."

At first, Cook recalls, Simmons was planning to leave his Gibson Signature bass at home and just sing. "I told him, respectfully, as a Kiss fan, if I came out to see you and you weren't playing bass, I'd be pretty bummed." Simmons, Asbrock says, "is absolutely one of the most underrated bass players in rock.

Shouse, who switches to bass in Ace's band, agrees. "You'd think he'd hammer the bass really hard, but actually Gene's touch is very economical and light," he says. "He grew up on McCartney's bass lines and '60s R&B music, so Gene is a great walking-bass player."

Cook, Asbrock and Shouse split the guitar duties three ways in Simmons' band, allowing them to do things Kiss can't, like have Shouse and Asbrock play main line and top harmony figures in "Detroit Rock City" while Cook holds down those syncopated backing riffs. And they encouraged Simmons to play more inside cuts like "Charisma" and "Got Love for Sale."

When Ace Frehley joined Simmons for a show in St. Paul, Minnesota on that first tour in 2017, he was so impressed by the new blood — who collectively call themselves the Talismen — that he let his own band go and hired them on the spot. Equipped with Vintage U.S. Pro Shop V100BLK and V120SM guitars and a VJ74MRGHB P-style bass for Shouse (all with Elixir strings), a Marshall cab backline, and a clutch of Kemper Profilers that lean on Michael Britt's excellent vintage Marshall presets, the equally sharp Ace Frehley Band took to the road, performing Frehley's 1978 self-titled solo record in its entirety at the Kiss Convention in 2018.

The Ace band recently completed a few months of arena touring alongside Alice Cooper. But even with all that firepower on the bill with him, Ace still proudly takes the solos himself — solos Shouse describes as "songs within songs. Ace's solos in those classic Kiss songs are just as important as the lead vocal, and if you cover a Kiss song, you'd better not just 'jam' the solo, dude — you'd better learn it, and nail it. It's that important."

Beyond the precise arc and harmonies, Cook says, it's the spirit behind them that makes it Kiss. "Can you deny how much those opening chords to 'Love Gun' hit you in the chest? Kiss understood that what people want from rock guitar is the bare essentials — not too much, but not too little. Kiss give you what you can digest, with a ton of attitude, and it hits you in that feel-good spot in the heart."

BOB DEHART (COOK AND ASBROCK); MICHELE REED (SHOUSE)

Stanley onstage at the Long Beach Arena, California, 1976

going Gold in the process and picking up a People's Choice Award. Its success ensured Kiss's hellfire-and-brimstone stage show would, for the foreseeable future, be tempered by the passing out of roses and the wafting of orchestral music through the PA.

Ideally, *Destroyer* would have seen the fast-living Ace Frehley taking vocals on a track, something the other members had been encouraging him to do ever since he turned up years earlier with the best part of "Cold Gin" in his pocket. Not wanting to fully embrace the limelight at this point, Ace chose to put all his effort into the melodic, in-the-pocket guitar work that made him Stanley's most excellent axe-slinging partner. It wasn't until the 1977's *Love Gun* album that a bona fide all-singing/all-dancing Ace song arrived by means of "Shock Me." "And the funny thing with 'Shock Me' was that Ace did all of the vocals lying flat on his back in the studio," Stanley recalls. "He wasn't drunk; he just liked the extra pressure on his chest."

Of course, the Space Ace wasn't unfamiliar with the horizontal position, having quaffed deeply from the rock and roll goblet. But with Ezrin in charge, there were rules in place for the first time. "Looking back," Stanley reflects, "this was the start of a new and necessary mindset for us. Basically, if someone doesn't turn up, the show must go on. You know, Ace has got his life under control these days. I have great fun talking with him. But things were different back then. It's all been written about already, but he was succumbing to the excesses of the rock and roll lifestyle rather than taking advantage of its perks."

Ace did his best to fall in line with Ezrin's approach and take direction. Listening to "Detroit Rock City," the producer dreamed up the dual-lead guitar break that takes the whole thing to a higher level of enjoyment. "And Bob sang that solo section note for note, then asked Ace to learn it," Stanley recounts. "Including the harmony."

But Ace wasn't always up to snuff, and one occasion when Ace was, to all intents and purposes, lost in space, Ezrin ushered in Detroit session guitarist Dick Wagner to provide electric and acoustic guitar. A session and stage pro who had previously played credited and uncredited with Alice Cooper, Lou Reed and Aerosmith, Wagner was the only musician, apart from the band members themselves, to play an instrument on *Destroyer*, most notably for the solo in "Sweet Pain," and he made no attempt to disguise his presence by fretting in Frehley fashion. He was onboard to do the best job he could, guided by a producer determined to use every trick in the book to wring out the magic.

Of course, some of Ezrin's tricks were decidedly low tech. Today, it's normal for drummers to lay down their parts to a click track, but the technology didn't exist in 1976. Which is why Ezrin opted for a cigar box with a microphone inside, which he would tap with a drumstick to keep the musicians as much in line as possible.

ARMANDO GALLO/GETTY IMAGES

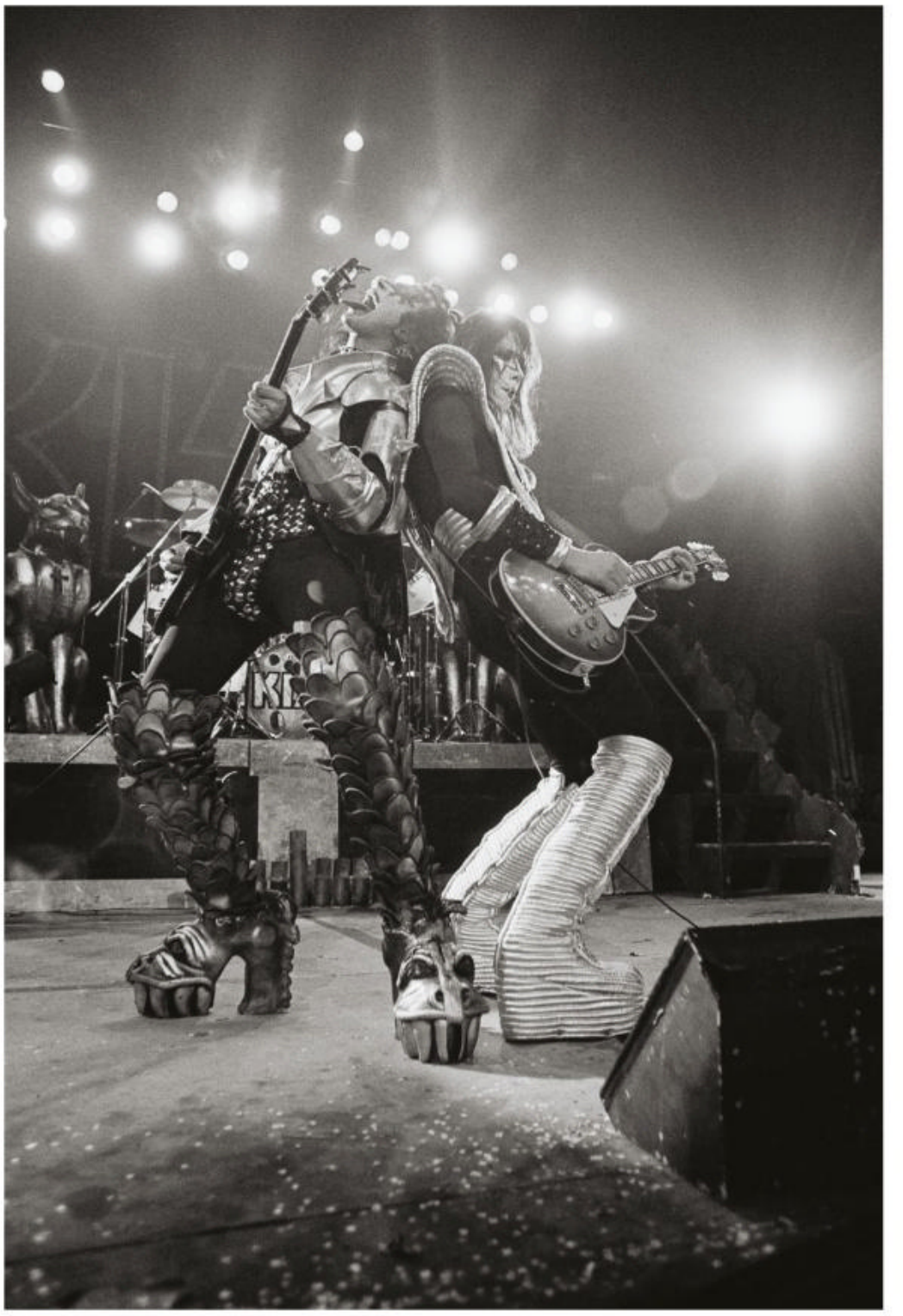
It was this kind of precision, married to an ambition larger than Godzilla, that was the hallmark of *Destroyer*. With the band having granted Ezrin the benefit of "final say," the producer was free to execute his vision. There was no holding back — no idea too grand to execute.

Though it's tempting to call it "kitchen-sink production," *Destroyer*'s sonic execution is more like a rocket-firing washing machine, with all manner of extra-curricular elements boldly set on spin cycle. With the Bronx Boys Choir on "Great Expectations," the New York Philharmonic on "Beth," a calliope on "Flaming You" and the sound effect of a car crash on "Detroit Rock City," *Destroyer* had plenty to catch the ear and spark the imagination. Pianos and power chords worked closely together, and all sound effects were printed directly to tape. A less self-assured producer would have recorded everything au naturel and added the required delay, distortion and what-not in the mix, but not Ezrin, who preferred to add the icing while the cake was being baked. "If you were to play the multi-track of *Destroyer* back through the mixing desk, it would sound just like the album," Stanley confirms. "Everything would already be there."

In keeping with the mighty sweep of the music, *Destroyer* saw the band going for broke on the visual side too. Out went the old costumes. In came a suitably all-conquering post-apocalyptic comic-book-chic look that gave the group a much-needed update to go with their sonic rehab. It was this look that painter/illustrator Ken Kelly — a relative of fantasy/sci-fi illustrator Frank Frazetta — was asked to capture for *Destroyer*'s sleeve, the result of which was perhaps the most famous representation of the band ever. It's a magnificent piece of rubble-rousing art, sometimes copied, sometimes spoofed (as on the Sloppy Seconds album *Destroyed*), but forever loved. Unfortunately, when Kelly's first painting showed the four members in their earlier *Alive!*-era costumes, he was forced to redo it.

Considering how much *Destroyer* defined Kiss at the back end of a decade that saw them move from rehearsal-room hopefuls to multi-Platinum gods, it's interesting to speculate whether their growth would have been the same were it not for the complete merging of image, music and message that takes place on this album. The band would hook up with Ezrin again for both a low point — 1981's *(Music From) The Elder* — and a celebrated return to form — 1992's *Revenge* — but the mojo would never work harder than it did here.

The fact remains that time has been kind to *Destroyer*, a record still very much connected to its own hair and teeth. Even the previously hidden sonic montage "Rock & Roll Party" has come to sound like a relevant part of the album, when in fact it was put there purely and simply to soak up some time: Even with the inclusion of the roughly minute-and-a-half track, *Destroyer* clocks in under 35 minutes. Ultimately, the album shows what can be achieved when the studio gods are grinning away like fools.



Simmons and Frehley onstage circa 1976

"I guess 'swagger' is probably the right word," Stanley offers. "The songs have a truly majestic feel, without coming across as either pompous or contrived. Bob was just a joy to work with — the first genuine producer we'd put our trust in."

Remarkably, for all Ezrin's control over the proceedings, he couldn't dissuade the band from their choice of title. "I know that he didn't really like it," Stanley says. "He thought 'destroyer' sounded negative, but for me it was too good not to use. This was one of those records where — from the music right through to the name — the planets were all in perfect alignment."

"IF YOU WERE TO PLAY THE MULTI-TRACK, IT WOULD SOUND JUST LIKE THE ALBUM. EVERYTHING WOULD ALREADY BE THERE"

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS

Simmons and Stanley in their dressing room, New York, February 1977

‘MUSIC AND *ALL SORTS* OF CRAZY SH*T’

Ace, Paul, Gene and the gang reveal all in these exclusive excerpts from *Destroyer*’s 45th anniversary boxset.

HELMED BY THE visionary producer Bob Ezrin, along with engineers Jay Messina and Corky Stasiak, the recording sessions for *Destroyer* — held between January 4 and February 3, 1976 at the storied Record Plant in New York City — were deeply creative, occasionally combative and surprisingly disciplined. Still, it was the result of a heated combustion: a single-minded, highly educated and inspired musical professional attempting to harness the talents of four young rock and roll Turks hellbent on enjoying the newfound success they’d earned from the previous year’s smash live LP *Alive!*

These testimonials from both band and studio guys alike — drawn exclusively and with permission from writer Ken Sharp’s superb 68-page booklet accompanying the Super Deluxe edition of the *Destroyer* 45th anniversary boxset — offer a riotous glimpse into how the now-classic album was arranged and tracked. And how, to accomplish that feat, a still fledgling producer named Bob Ezrin took the biggest rock stars in the world back to music school. Yep, with a blackboard. — JVR

GENE SIMMONS When we first met up with Bob Ezrin in pre-production rehearsals, he sat down and he said, “Okay, tune up,” and he saw how we tuned up, and said, “No. No. No. That’s not how you tune up.” We had taught ourselves how to tune the guitars, and we’d taught ourselves how to play and plug in. It was all sort of homemade. Bob taught us about [*tuning with*] harmonics. He also showed us, “Now, here’s an arrangement.” Before that we just started building, and it came together fast because we were touring all the time, and in the early days we released *Hotter Than Hell* and *Dressed to Kill* in the same year: wrote the songs, recorded them in the studio, and went on full tours. We didn’t have time to arrange anything. It was, “Okay here’s a new song and here’s your part. Boom, let’s go.”

PAUL STANLEY Working with Bob Ezrin that first time was like boot camp. What Bob taught us was discipline in the studio. For that first project, *Destroyer*, he literally wore a whistle around his neck, and would blow it and call us “campers.” It was trying to get the best out of us, and trying to get us to set a new

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

standard for ourselves. He was not above pointing a finger in your face and yelling at you. That's pretty funny when you're selling out arenas all over and you have somebody in the studio that's treating you like an imbecile. We went in there kind of green and came out a lot smarter for it. It stands the test of time real well.

ACE FREHLEY Working on *Destroyer* was like nothing I've ever experienced, because, prior to actually recording the album, Ezrin sat us down in something like a classroom and started lecturing us about music and all sorts of crazy shit. I'd never worked with a producer like that. I think Bob is a genius. But it was an adjustment process working with Bob. I got along with him fine when I came prepared and didn't have a hangover. But if I came in and I wasn't spot-on, then it was an issue.

Bob was used to working with professional musicians. When he worked with Alice Cooper, a lot of times he brought in studio musicians, rather than [*Alice Cooper guitarist*] Glen Buxton. So that was his mindset, and if I didn't get a solo right in five or 10 takes, there was some frustration that set in. So I was a little intimidated by him, but I think the majority of the solos came out great. There were brilliant moments on that record. Even though Bob and I didn't see eye-to-eye on a lot of things, the actual finished product was very innovative, and it showed growth for us. Bob made us look at things in a different light.

BOB EZRIN When you're building a house, you should know the terminology; and when you're trying to build a song, you should know the terminology of music. It's just easier to be able to say, "Let's do this in E♭," than to say, "Let's do this on that first fret just below that little dot over there." We decided that it would be a worthwhile investment to take a few days and go through music basics, just to get the band to feel comfortable. Then when we

MONSTER PLAYER

Kiss's lead guitarist since 2002, former Black 'n Blue guitar slinger Tommy Thayer plays on the Kiss studio albums *Sonic Boom* (2009) and *Monster* (2012), and is well regarded for his charity and foundation work. His latest (and fourth) signature guitar from Epiphone is the mahogany-bodied, maple-capped Tommy Thayer Signature "Electric Blue" Les Paul, boasting Seymour Duncan JB humbuckers, an engraved Tommy Thayer metal truss-rod cover, chrome-finished pickguard, eye-catching Electric Blue sparkle finish — a collaboration with artist John Douglas — and the iconic Spaceman logo on the back of the headstock.

got to things like time signatures, the band said, "There is no way we can do this." I said, "Sure, we can," and we came up with that passage in "Flaming Youth." I just had Peter keep playing quarter notes on the floor, and the guys playing the 7/4 riff, and the riff turned itself around. Nobody had to do anything, and they were just blown away that they could do this. It was like a kid driving a car for the first time.

PAUL STANLEY Bob was very much into texture, depth and color. I think when we came into the studio, we probably thought "color" was how much treble or bass you'd put on your Marshall amp. Bob was dealing with doubling guitars, with one guitar slightly VSO'd [*shorthand for VariSpeed, a manual flanging effect produced when the speed of a tape machine is decreased or increased*], so they'd be slightly out of tune to each other, to just make the guitar bigger sounding.

ACE FREHLEY Whatever guitars I was using onstage for the most part was what I used on *Destroyer*. So it was mainly Gibson Les Pauls, but I might double [*parts*] with a Fender because [*with their single-coil pickups*] they have a completely different harmonic range than a humbucking pickup. So when you play a rhythm guitar part with a Les Paul, and then double it with a Strat or a Tele, you're going to get a thicker sound. Plus, a lot of times I'll double those parts again with an acoustic guitar, but really tuck the volume of the acoustic low. So if you're listening for it you're really not sure if it's an acoustic guitar, but if you pull it out of the mix, you'd miss it.

Simmons and Stanley onstage in Oslo, June 27, 2019

Ace Frehley at Download Festival 2015

Bob Ezrin (right) with Alice Cooper

The *Destroyer* 45th Anniversary Super Deluxe Edition boxset

CORKY STASIAK We had almost finished *Destroyer*. We did a schmoozefest at the studio for [*Kiss manager*] Bill Aucoin, [*label head*] Neil Bogart and some of the dignitaries over at Casablanca. We set up some microphones and did a guitar overdub in front of everyone to kind of get them involved. So here we are in the control room, and Bob says, "Let's do a vocal overdub now; they need a pair of headphones." So, not thinking, I grabbed the headphone wire and pulled it. Paul's headphones were still connected to his guitar strap on his Gibson Firebird, which was leaning against an Anvil case.

When I yanked at the cord, the guitar started to fall. As it was falling I leaped across the studio to save it and just missed catching it. I heard a loud "Boing!" and knew exactly what had happened. The guitar had fallen over and the neck had snapped in half at the nut. I went into the control room, and told Paul we had a "little accident," and that his guitar fell. He said, "Well, just pick it up." I walked him out to the studio. When he saw the guitar lying on the ground, broken, he said, "Oh my God—my favorite guitar!" It killed me because I knew it couldn't be fixed. Paul was very, very gracious about it. That guitar was the black Gibson Firebird on the cover of *Kiss Alive!* That was Paul's favorite guitar. To this day, I still feel miserable about it.

Excerpted from "The Story of Kiss Destroyer," by Ken Sharp, from the boxset Destroyer 45th. *Reprinted with permission.*

GETTY IMAGES (KISS); TOTAL GUITAR MAGAZINE (FREHLEY); RICK DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES (EZRIN)

LONE STAR Mojo

Sue Foley brings swagger, sweetness and bite to the bold and unfiltered *Pinky's Blues*.

BY NIKKI O'NEILL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRACY ANNE HART

ALTHOUGH SUE FOLEY is originally from Canada, on two major occasions her life has directed her to Texas. At the end of the '80s, the guitarist and singer-songwriter moved to Austin when the city's late blues impresario Clifford Antone signed her to his record label and became her mentor. The timing and location couldn't have been more perfect for a 21-year-old blues guitarist building a career. Right when Stevie Ray Vaughan was blowing the music world away and putting Austin on the map, Antone made sure Foley shared the stage with every national and local blues master who came through his eponymous club. Playing three sets per night, six nights a week, Foley honed her chops and found her musical home and kindred spirits within the Texas blues community (one memorable off-stage moment involved shooting dice with Albert Collins). Seeing her potential and dedication, Antone also ensured Foley went on the road to open for Buddy Guy, Koko Taylor and Johnny Winter.

Following her pregnancy and marriage, Foley returned to Canada to raise her son but continued touring and releasing a number of albums, always staying faithful to her love for traditional blues, even as she began studying flamenco guitar and incorporating some of those influences into her blues. Then she was suddenly contacted by Mike Flanigin, a Hammond B3 player with Jimmie Vaughan and Billy Gibbons, and an old friend from her Austin days. The Antone's club had re-opened, and Flanigin wanted her to come down and play. This led to them working together on Foley's critically acclaimed 2018 album, *The Ice Queen*. Anchored in Texas electric blues, yet musically varied with horns and acoustic solo numbers, the album featured duets with Gibbons, Vaughan and Charlie Sexton, and showcased Foley's talent for writing

blues songs and lyrics that avoid genre clichés. It also showed that it's fully possible to make a blues album with a modern approach and still win the Blues Foundation's Koko Taylor Award for Best Female Traditional Blues Artist, which Foley did in 2020.

Riding a wave of success — including appearances with Vaughan at the Beacon Theater and Royal Albert Hall, and a packed calendar of festivals and international tours — Foley saw her performance schedule grind to a grim halt with the pandemic. As a response to current circumstances and restrictions, she presents *Pinky's Blues* with no overdubs and few guest musicians, capturing a heavyweight blues power trio with bassist John Penner, and drummer Chris Layton in electrifying interactions. The result is a raw and unfiltered tribute to Texas blues and R&B. We spoke with Foley about the album after seeing her perform in Chicago with her trio, featuring Penner on bass and Corey Keller on drums.

"ANYBODY CAN HIDE BEHIND PEDALS. I DON'T"

ABOVE, OPPOSITE AND PREVIOUS: Sue Foley onstage at Rockefellers, in Houston, October 22, 2021

You've followed up *The Ice Queen* with a straight-ahead Texas blues album. What made you go in this direction?

It was actually our producer, Mike Flanigin, who came up with the idea to make a blues guitar album. He produced *The Ice Queen* as well, and that was an artistic project that was really varied, where we were looking at each song individually and having different lineups of musicians. Then we did Mike's album, *West Texas Blues*, which used the same group of players in the studio. So we decided to take the more stripped-down approach. Since we were in the framework of not gathering in big groups, we knew it was going to be a small, close session, with just a few people spaced out in a big room, and that we had to do everything live with all of us playing together and in the moment.

The album sounds bold and ballsy, and your playing has the swagger to match.

Thank you. I listened to it recently to refresh my memory before touring, and I thought, Yeah, this sounds pretty greasy!

There is some tender and lyrical R&B playing on it too, but the overall vibe is intense.

Well, we took a deep-dive into some really great songs, mostly the Texas blues catalog, with Clarence Gatemouth Brown [*"Okie Dokie Stomp"*], Frankie Lee Sims [*"Boogie Real Low"*] and Lavelle White [*"Stop These Teardrops"*], but also Chicago stuff like Robert Nighthawk [*"Someday"*] and Junior Wells [*"When the Cat's Gone the Mice Play"*], and then my own songs [*"Hurricane Girl," "Dallas Man," "Pinky's Blues"*]. When you play that kind of stuff, you've got to be really committed to it.

But we were also just having fun. Whatever vibe you're picking up from the studio, we were letting out a lot of energy, since we hadn't been able to play live for a while. So there's some lighthearted fun there too. We were just happy to hang out together.

The title track is a slow instrumental blues. Two minutes into it, you do a very cool thing that almost sounds like sparks are coming out of your Tele. Is that just a backward rake?

It is, and it's something Freddie King did a lot on songs like "San Ho Zay," but he was using metal fingerpicks. I use a thumbpick and my fingers, but I have acrylic nails on my right-hand fingers, and those kind of act as fingerpicks.

Those have got to be hard to maintain?

They are. I try to keep them up, because I do a lot of Spanish nylon-string guitar playing at home, and sometimes on the road, too. I find that you can apply some of the Spanish fingerstyle techniques to a Fender Telecaster, they're very compatible.

Why the Telecaster in particular? Is it because of its tonal clarity?

Yeah. Teles are very simple and pure. There's just a tone and a volume knob, and all the nuances that you do in that framework are yours.

Teles can be tough taskmasters, too, since they don't sustain as easily as a guitar with humbuckers.

Exactly. You've got to get used to playing pretty clean. I think if you can play a Tele well, it shows that you have good technique, because you have to play kind of precise and clean. There's nowhere to hide.

How did Chris Layton's presence behind the drum kit influence your playing?

A lot. When I talked about the album sounding greasy, that's Chris. He's just got that really deep pocket. When you're playing with somebody that strong, you feel really supported, and they also help direct where a song's gonna go. And you trust them,

because you know that they know where it should go. It's not that Chris is telling me how to play; he's directing things to where the groove is so deep that you're comfortable, and it's just going where it needs to go. He knows what's happening, and he's in the driver's seat in a lot of ways.

But you like where he's driving, so you don't mind.
I love where he's driving, and I think the drums on this album sound amazing, partially because of that big open room we were in.

How did you record the album?
We were set up just like we'd be onstage at a live gig, but with a few baffles between us, and a lot of room mics. The drums were in the middle, with the guitars and bass on each side, and the vocals were up in the middle. [*Engineer*] Chris Bell was capturing all of it, so you'll hear mic bleed, like guitar in the drum mics. And the bass was going through a mic'd amp, as opposed to going direct. [*Watch the YouTube video* Pinky's Blues The Sessions *for more details behind the recording sessions.*]

"I REALLY STRESS BEING PICKY ABOUT WHO YOU LISTEN TO"

Where did you record?
Fire Station Studios in San Marcos, Texas. It's the same place where I recorded *The Ice Queen*. It was all done in about two and a half to three days. What you're hearing is all live, and mostly first or second takes. Vocals and guitars recorded at the same time. We couldn't even overdub if we wanted to.

On the slow blues, "Say It's Not So," your vocals are very emotive. You're completely connected to the lyrics, and you go into a wailing solo on the next beat. It takes a lot of live performing to reach that comfort level with music and lyrics, and on both instruments.
Singing was never what drove me. I wanted to play guitar, but I had to sing, and over time I learned to enjoy it. It is about doing a lot of gigs and pushing yourself, but I always stress that it's also important who you listen to. It used to be pretty common for a guitar player to also be a great singer. Think of T-Bone Walker, or Freddie, B.B. and Albert King.

You also do a blazing version of Gatemouth's "Okie Dokie Stomp."
I've been playing it since I was in my early 20s. That song is a rite of passage in the blues guitar playing world, especially in Texas blues, but Hollywood Fats in California also did a famous version of it in E♭, where he adapted those horn lines to guitar. Ronnie Earl's version is insanely great too, and it's in C, which is the same key I do it in, so I kind of reference Ronnie's version, to be fair. It's a fun song to get under your belt, like the Freddie King instrumentals. Back in the day, we had to know these songs.

Your rig is minimal, but the tone you get onstage and in the studio is full and rich. Let's talk about that, starting with your signature guitar of many years.
Well, Pinky is a stock Fender Telecaster with the pink paisley design that was reissued in the mid-to-late '80s, and I got it in 1987. They're made in Japan, and for whatever reason, the Teles from that era are really good. I haven't changed anything on it. I use the stock pickups. I'm afraid to change them, since I like the sound so much and I might not get it back. I've had it refretted a few times. [*Foley has three "Pinky" Telecasters, and her first is now off the road.*] As for strings, I've used D'Addario [*EXL 110*] .010–.046 strings for probably 30 years. I change them every few gigs if we're playing steady, since I like them kinda fresh.

On *Pinky's Blues*, you use your original Fender Bassman that you've had for the past 30 years. Have you modded it in any way?
I don't really mess with the speakers. It's very rare that I change them. The only thing I change a lot is the [*6L6*] tubes. But, man, you can't kill those Bassmans! They stand up on the road, night after night. It's a simple workhorse of an amp, but if you get one in good shape, you can get a killer sound.

If the amp sound has a lot of body, like the Bassman, which has 40 loud watts, the 4x10s get the sound across with the right amount of power. You can drive the amp and speakers without getting as loud as

Opposite: Onstage at the Fourth Annual Love Rock NYC benefit concert for God's Love We Deliver, at the Beacon Theater, March 12, 2020

Below: With Billy Gibbons at Antone's, in Austin

ASTRIDA VALIGORSKY/GETTY IMAGES

Foley onstage with (from left) Chris "Whipper" Layton, Gibbons and Jimmie Vaughan at a benefit for the Clifford Antone Foundation, September 6, 2021

the 2x12s on a Twin. It's really versatile and will handle a small, medium or big stage. I find that you can get a full sound and get it to move around.

How do you position the amp live?
It depends on the stage and the room. Sometimes when I play a smaller room, I'll put the amp on its back, aiming it straight up. I learned that from Jimmie Vaughan. If you're in a theater and you need the sound to be in the system too, you can baffle the amp to deflect the sound a bit, and if you're on a big stage, like at a festival, you can have the two of them together and wide open.

You also don't use pedals very much.
I do love reverb, so I use the Boss RV-5, and I also use some tremolo, like a Boss TR-2 or Strymon Flint, on a couple of tunes. Since the sound of a Telecaster is very clean and straight ahead, I sometimes use an Xotic RC clean boost, just to get sustain and widen the tone ever so much if I'm playing at a lower volume but still want to hear the pure tone. Cindy Cashdollar taught me that. But I literally keep the boost at the lowest possible setting. If I can drive the amp hard enough, I won't use it. I like the sound out of the amp mostly.

Anybody can hide behind pedals. I don't. You don't want to lean on them too much or they'll start to shape your tone when it really should come from the guitar, amp and your hands. You've got to create yourself and your tone, and then use the pedal, but a lot of times people go the opposite way. They use the pedal to create themselves. It's backwards, and it's so pedal-heavy that you can't tell who that player is. So many players all sound the same — like the pedal.

Do you have any tips for improving tone?
I stress being picky about who you listen to, or at least spending a lot of time listening to the tone masters and soaking it in. Your creativity, phrasing, technique and inventiveness are so important, but your tone is your DNA and your musical stamp. You can have all the flash in the world, but if your tone sucks, you're nowhere. I'd rather have a great tone and less chops than all chops and no tone.

It means so much that people have been saying that they like the tone on this album. But it isn't just about me. There's Chris with his mic placements, and Mike who was stubborn about all of us being in one room. So you're hearing the guitar through all of these other instruments, too.

When we enjoy hearing master singers like Aretha Franklin or Ray Charles, the reason their voices sound so compelling isn't just because of their phrasing or vocal technique. It's also their timbre and sound that we love.
Yeah. It's the same thing with guitar. Your tone is your voice.

GARY MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

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RUST BELT *Troubadour*

After making his mark with Gregg Allman and members of the Band's camp, **Scott Sharrard** now takes his place in Little Feat while dropping a solo album infused with his Midwest roots.

BY MARTIN McQUADE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANNY CLINCH

SCOTT SHARRARD HAS no shortage of talents. The acclaimed guitarist, singer, songwriter and bandleader likewise has no dearth of providence. He was born on the very day his future lodestar, blues virtuoso Freddie King, died. Sharrard's father, himself a guitarist, guided his son, exposing him to the Allman Brothers Band, the Band and Little Feat. Sharrard would describe these experiences as "Big Bang moments."

In the years ahead, he built generational bridges to his triumvirate of top groups, and they beckoned to him. After studying music in Milwaukee and developing his chops, Sharrard formed a band with Gregg Allman's saxophonist Jay Collins, resulting in his becoming lead guitarist from 2008 to 2017 with the Gregg Allman Band. Thus, the first plank was set. Sharrard formed the second plank by establishing the CKS Band with keyboardist Bruce Katz of Allman's band and drummer Randy Ciarlante of the Band. He had the honor of playing at Levon Helm's farewell concert, and Helm's daughter Amy has regularly sung with Sharrard, especially his Brickyard Band.

He has now laid the third plank by joining Little Feat while forging a bridge to his Midwest roots with his new album *Rustbelt*, an Immediate Family Records release. Sharrard spoke with *Guitar Player* to trace out his journey and discuss the road up ahead.

What prompted your passion for Little Feat?
It was my dad playing their songs at home. Their album *Waiting for Columbus* grabbed me when I was eight. In 1988, I saw them during their Let It Roll tour and on *Saturday Night Live*. I admired their flawless blend of different styles of American music, their unique mix of heartfelt ballads and gonzo, *Mad Magazine*–type boogie stuff. They also had big Band influences, especially with how co-founder Bill Payne innovatively used synthesizers. Songwriting was crucial for them. Their lyrics hit me where it counts.

Now you're branching out to another band in your pantheon. How did this occur?
I met Bill sitting in with the Doobie Brothers while touring with Gregg. Eventually they adopted many

people from Gregg's camp: our tour manager, sound guy and percussionist Marc Quinones. Little Feat's singer/songwriter/bandleader Paul Barrere became ill in 2019 and couldn't do a couple of tours. Larry Campbell, formerly musical director of the Levon Helm Band, and his wife, singer Teresa Williams, were booked to open for the band but couldn't perform the last two gigs. Bill asked around the Doobie Brothers camp; Tom Johnston, Pat Simmons and Marc recommended me. I did the first show the day Paul died. That was tough. I rose to the challenge and gave a worthy performance on their behalf. Afterward, they said, "You're in the band now." It was Paul passing me the baton from beyond.

"I'M KEENLY FOCUSED ON SONGWRITING. IT'S A CRAFT, LIKE PLAYING A GREAT GUITAR SOLO, SOMETHING YOU HONE AND DEEPEN"

I've already played six gigs with Little Feat. I haven't wiped the smile off my face. We're about to tour, celebrating the legacy along with a fresh lineup. We've been writing a lot and preparing a new album.

Is there a bridge between the Brickyard Band and Little Feat?

I assembled the Brickyard Band as a modern Little Feat, just as diverse and cohesive. Singer/songwriter Moses Patrou was my inspiration. We became friends playing with Jay Collins, who also played with Little Feat and Gregg. I always wanted to be in a band with another singer/songwriter in it. Moses is also a percussionist, drummer and keyboard player. The Brickyard Band was five guys sounding like eight. Little Feat was my template when making [*2012's*] *Scott Sharrard and the Brickyard Band*.

Which guitars do you use with Little Feat?

Little Feat requires its own scenario. I'm trying to complement guitarist/trumpet player Fred Tackett, who has been with the band since the '80s. Fred has a remarkable guitar style, not only evident with Little Feat but also on records with Rickie Lee Jones, Bob Seger and Tom Waits, to name a few. I also need the sound of Barrere and Lowell George, the band's other co-founder. To achieve this, I got a couple of Stratocasters for slide. Formerly I played slide in standard tuning. With Little Feat, I'm playing mostly in open A, like Lowell, and a couple of songs in open G. I got my new Heritage H137 guitar, made in the original Gibson factory in Kalamazoo. It's like a Les Paul Junior with two pickups. I'm using that for standard tuning. I have my Custom Shop standard-tuning Gibson CS-336 circa 2002 with Ox 4 Pickups, the guitar that I'm mostly associated with, the one I played live with Gregg.

What are your gear preferences?

To achieve Little Feat's slide sound, you need a unity gain compressor. Origin Effects makes a pedal called a Slide Rig designed to recreate that sound. I have that on my board. I've started working with Orange Amplifiers. I'm overwhelmed by their AD30 amplifier, which I have with two 12s. I got my trusty 1966 Fender Vibrolux Reverb. I'm running both in parallel simultaneously. I also use a Heptode phaser, because Paul often used one in the '70s.

Are there other Little Feat albums that stand out?

My personal favorites are *Sailing Shoes* and their live album *Waiting for Columbus*. There are numerous gems throughout their records. They had several writers. Bill, Paul and Lowell George are renowned, but Fred Tackett also wrote songs, namely the beautiful "Fool Yourself" and, with Lowell, "Be One Now" on *Down on the Farm*. Perhaps my favorite Little Feat song is "Long Distance Love," which I recorded for a video last year.

What is Little Feat's legacy?

They influenced Led Zeppelin and Bonnie Raitt, for starters. They wouldn't be the way we know them without Little Feat. Little Feat massively influenced my career.

Who influenced Little Feat?

Lowell's steeped in New Orleans' funk influence. Bill's rooted in that city's piano tradition. He'd cite Little Richard, Professor Longhair and James Booker. Bill's songwriting influences range from Dylan and the Beatles to colleagues like Jackson Browne, James Taylor and Allen Toussaint. Little Feat covered many of Allen's songs.

I see that you feature Payne on *Rustbelt*. That's yet another bridge and a perfect segue. In addition to being a paean to the region, is *Rustbelt* autobiographical?

All my albums are, to some extent. My family is from the Rust Belt going back generations. I was born in Ann Arbor. I spent the '80s in Dearborn, outside Detroit, under the strain of a crushed urban environment. I then moved to Minnesota, Pennsylvania and, finally, to Wisconsin. My grandparents were union workers with lakefront vacation houses, with paid retirement. Then my parents were left out to pasture fighting the corporate world to survive. There's another part of being in a crossroads generation.

My southern friends call Detroit "North Memphis." There's a long history of southern music migrating to the Midwest. My mentors were originally

southern — Willie Higgins, Lee Gates and Milwaukee Slim, blues musicians who pushed me toward going deeper down the well where American music comes from. The Midwest, however, has a different psychology that's in my DNA. It's socially, politically, culturally, gastronomically and artistically mixed-up, chaotic and noisy. That describes my mentality making this record. A great impetus arose while touring with my band from 2017 to 2019 through the Midwest, going over roads I traveled as a kid moving from town to town. It led me to thinking about my kids and the passage of time.

"I WOULD IMAGINE SCOTT'S DEATH WHEN I WAS A KID. I'VE TRIED TO LIVE UP TO HIS GHOST "

Rustbelt was a three-year work in progress because of Covid. Otherwise, it would have been done last year. We shelved it for 14 months. I entirely recorded it once and re-recorded half of it, all the while rewriting most of the lyrics and music. I've never recorded like that. It's my sixth solo album, and my most personal. It's a turning point, because for the first time I'm keenly focused on songwriting, which I had looked upon as something you only do with blind inspiration. It's a craft, like playing a great guitar solo, something you hone and deepen. I wrote nearly 30 songs and pared it down to nine. It's a concept album about loss, transition and being a father, husband and musician. I realized they were story songs, touchstones reflecting upon my origins and people I've known.

"Gratitude" and "Anne Marie" are particularly introspective.

I wrote "Gratitude," a secular gospel song, for my wife, Albane. We've been through a lot, and she's a real inspiration. Amy Helm's on vocals. Anne Marie, my wife's grandmother, deeply affected my life. We visited her in the south of France. It was like stepping into a Van Gogh painting. She didn't speak English. We communicated through food and music. Her husband was a Nazi prisoner of war. While writing one night, the song landed in my lap. Justin Schipper's on pedal steel and Bill Payne's on piano.

With Gregg Allman at the Georgia Theatre, in Athens, Georgia, January 6, 2015

CHRIS MCKAY/GETTY IMAGES

"Michigan Sunset" is the album's epic song.

Amy and Justin also appear on "Michigan Sunset," another composition that suddenly came to me. It's about my namesake, Scott Smith, the lead singer in my dad's band. Scott was a conscientious objector who was drafted in '69. On his first tour of duty, he was put on the frontline as a medic and killed immediately. It was a big responsibility to be named after a gifted person who was stolen. I would imagine Scott's death when I was a kid. I've tried to live up to his ghost. I found my life's role is to play consistently with my heroes. Scott Smith would be the same age as many of them, maybe would even be one of them. Vietnam was American foreign policy's original sin. That's why you must revisit that time.

I was unsure about this song. I played it for songwriter Gary Nicholson. He said, "It's your song. Don't let anybody but you sing it and play it." That professional nod pushed me over the edge, giving me the guts to try it. "Michigan Sunset" has touchstones to my childhood, things I'd always hear from my family, like, "cold in my blood." "Michigan Sunset" and "My Only True Friend," which I wrote for Gregg, are most my important compositions.

Are "Too Many Losers" and "Rising Tide" metaphors for the upheavals the Rust Belt has undergone?

Not necessarily. My favorite line on the record is, "Too many losers are coming up winners." You can guess whom that's about. I wrote "Rising Tide" in the winter of 2017, a tumultuous year personally and for the country. For me, it's prophetic about the unraveling we've experienced up through the present and expresses my belief that we'd taken a dangerous turn with a calamity lying in wait. The song's about the wisdom of no escape and challenging the dying of the light. Duality and contradiction are good fodder for songcraft. I'm proud of the outro trade off with Dan Littleton. I've never recorded such a long duel. Dan's among my favorite guitarists. His distinct sound elevates the music. I discovered him playing with Amy. He's outstanding on her *Didn't It Rain* album.

How does the instrumental title track fit into the album's structure?

Two versions play throughout like an actual record,

front to back. It's an old-school approach linking some of the different tunes creating an instrumental journey from the Midwest to NYC. The first version in the album order features Justin's unique use of effects with the pedal steel. He also adds some baritone guitar. It's the album's sonic palate cleanser. It ends with keyboard wizard Brian Charette's Rhodes solo. "Rustbelt Reprise" reinterprets the initial version and continues the guitar tradeoff between Dan Littleton and me from "Rising Tide." Dan has an unconventional approach to melody and tone in his lead playing.

Your blues vocals pack a wallop.
I caught a bit of Gregg on the way out. I was alongside him for a decade. I've tried to incorporate whatever I can from him. I've other influences such as Sam Cooke, Ray Charles and Johnny Adams but I don't aim to sound like anyone.

***Rustbelt* has many impressive backing vocals, notably on "Only Human."**
The crème de la crème, Catherine Russell, is on that, with Charlie Drayton on drums. She's almost her own gospel choir. Catherine also sings choruses on "Michigan Sunset." Our singers are an embarrassment of riches, such as Dan Littleton's wife, Elizabeth Mitchell. They're associated with Amy and the team at Levon Helm Studios. The secret weapon, vocally, is Adam Minkoff, who plays the shit out of a bass. Adam and Catherine are together on "On the Run Again."

MATTHEW EISMAN/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

"On the Run Again" contains vivid imagery, such as "Hope is like a candle that you try your best to hold."
Some imagery seems literal, but it's not. A favorite lyric is, "I left you on the beach with a diamond in your hand." The ring isn't on her finger; did she say yes or no? I decided to leave it ambiguous. I've never written songs with so many long verses, something I associate with my favorite writers Warren Zevon, Dylan, Elvis Costello and Waits, and, from an earlier time, Cole Porter. I'm happy with the lyrical arc. It's my signature song describing a dedicated musician's life.

"Bad New" exudes conflict and danger, especially with its abrupt ending.

At City Winery in New York City for *Southern Blood: Celebrating Gregg Allman.* (from left) Sharrard, Luther Dickinson, Warren Haynes and Southside Johnny

That's also a song about being a musician and being a man. It's Jekyll and Hyde in reverse. It's a live-show staple sometimes lasting 12 minutes. "Bad News" and "On the Run Again," *Rustbelt*'s opening songs, are companions, musically and lyrically.

When we approached the conclusion, drummer Eric Kalb asked, "How do we end it?" We had often played it live, never ending the song that way. We made *Rustbelt* in two recording studios. One closed due to Covid, the other underwent major renovation. For a while, we couldn't get the studio. The rhythm section recorded "Bad News" live. I overdubbed the solo in my apartment in one take with a plug-in, without amplifiers. It's an old Fano SP6 built by guitarist [*and luthier*] Dennis Fano, with a Lollar P-90 in the neck, the only pickup I use on solos. I used an Origins Effects revival drive for the overdrive and a Strymon Flint for the spring reverb. I had a Scuffham Amp plug-in set up to be like a Dumble, and I used a Tweed Deluxe. You can move around the virtual mics. My producer Charlie Martinez and I were happy with the tone.

"I DON'T CARE WHAT ANYBODY HAS TO SAY OR THINK ABOUT IT. I DID THIS ONE FOR ME"

Do your covers on *Rustbelt* spotlight any of your personal icons?

I chose "I Ain't Gonna Worry" by Mississippi's Tommy Tate to arouse interest in his incredible blues singing and songwriting. Check out his *Koko Sessions*. He died in 2017. I know Dr. John's "A Losing Battle" from another mentor, guitarist/songwriter Stokes from Milwaukee. We regularly played it together. Since he died in between my albums, I dedicated it to him, recording it alone with two microphones and a laptop. It's my finale, since it doesn't get more Rust Belt than Stokes.

What other guitars and gear do you use?

Throughout I used my Heritage, Fano and Stratocasters, one with a Stratoblaster, with a loud bridge pickup for slide work. On one or two songs, I use a BNG guitar from Israel. They make a beautiful hollowbody guitar with P-90s. Acoustics-wise, I use my 1964 Martin 000-18. My dad passed it down to me. I use a Farida for Nashville tuning, where you put all the thin strings from a 12-string and don't use the thick strings, making a six-string sounds like a mandolin. I combine that with my Mule Resonator guitar on several songs. On "Michigan Sunset" and "Anne Marie," the main guitar characters are a Mule Resonator, a Nashville-tuned strumming guitar and a regular strumming guitar, usually my Gibson Dove. My Heritage and Farida are from Kalamazoo, Michigan and my Mule Resonator is from Saginaw, Michigan. How Rust Belt can you get?

Is *Rustbelt* a watershed for you?

With past recordings, I felt I was coming on fast and going to knock it out. Now I don't care what anybody has to say or thinks about it. I did this one for me. This was a bloodletting.

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WINNING LAP

Having mastered *Guitar Hero*, **Yasmin Williams** turned her attention to the real deal and became a lap-tapping superhero in her own right for a new generation of players.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZACH PIGG

MANY GUITARISTS WONDERED if the *Guitar Hero* video game craze would spawn a new generation of bona fide guitar heroes. We now have our answer: Yasmin Williams. After mastering *Guitar Hero 2* as a youngster, she transferred her finger dexterity into a lap-style tapping technique that is nothing short of extraordinary. Williams is quite capable of playing traditional upright fingerstyle too, and she alternates between the two positions, sometimes flipping her guitar approach mid-song. Like Kaki King, Williams has a highly inquisitive mind that leads her to try everything from playing with hammers and bows to exploring harp guitar and kora, and experimenting with an arsenal of effects. Since she sits down and often has the acoustic on her lap like a steel player, her percussive approach is distinctive, and she'll even use the instrument as a table, setting her kalimba on it and playing it when she's not plucking guitar strings.

When her hands are fully occupied, Williams makes use of her feet by donning tap shoes and tapping on a board to add more percussion to her mix. In addition, the creative lady has a pedalboard full of gadgets to conjure wild reverbs, delays, loops, synth sounds and backing tracks, but none of this would mean anything if the result wasn't wonderfully musical. As impressive as it is to watch Williams, her highly rhythmic and atmospheric audio stands on its own. Both 2018's *Unwind* and 2021's *Urban Driftwood* (Spinster) are very easy on the ears. Her compositions are interlaced with lovely ebbs and flows, and sound as natural as water cascading along a mountainside. Both albums are excellent acoustic chill mood plays.

"TO ME, IT'S KIND OF OBVIOUS, BUT A LOT OF PEOPLE ASK, 'HOW CAN YOU PLAY GUITAR WITH ONE HAND?'"

Williams is a Virginia native who went on to become the grand prize winner of New York University's UltraViolet Live talent show, the gold prize winner in the instrumental category of the Mid-Atlantic Song Contest, and a finalist in the *Rolling Stone* Young Gun guitar competition. Her long-term future is loaded with possibilities, and her immediate future is chock full of killer gigs with the likes of Andy McKee, Mike Dawes and Tommy Emmanuel. Make sure to catch the youngster with the fresh perspective that will make you wonder, Why didn't I think of that?

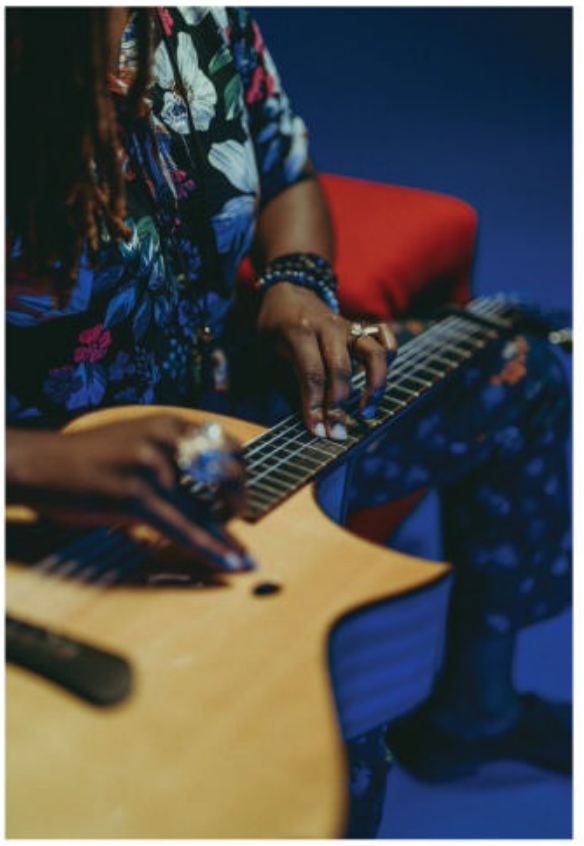
Just as Edward Van Halen popularized traditional two-hand tapping while not exclusively inventing it, Williams has the potential to do so with lap tapping. Dawes does some lap tapping, and both he and Williams acknowledge the advanced pioneering style of Canada's Erik Mongrain, whose "AirTap!" video has garnered more than seven and half million views on YouTube since its posting in 2006. According to Williams, he has long since retired the technique, and she was unaware that anyone else had ever played that way when she started. It was simply her curiosity kicking in back when the 24 year-old was a teenager. In any case, the torch is clearly in her capable hands.

How did you make the leap from guitar gamer to guitar player?

I started playing *Guitar Hero* 2 when I was 11, and after I beat the game at the highest level, my parents got me an electric guitar. At first it was a lot of Hendrix and Nirvana. I thought Nirvana would be easy to figure out, and I was trying to find stuff that was on my beginner level and still something I wanted to play. I eventually got sick of playing the same chords over and over. It just wasn't my style. So after a few years, I switched to acoustic. I remembered that on the expert level of the game, the difficult songs have a lot of tapping, so you have to kind of tap out the notes on the controller. It's not similar to playing an actual guitar at all, but I wanted to transfer my tapping technique from a *Guitar Hero* controller over to a real guitar. I eventually figured it out, and that was the start of playing the way I do now.

Can you detail your left-hand technique for lap tapping?

To me, it's kind of obvious, but a lot of people do ask me questions like, "How can you play guitar with one hand? Don't you need to strum with your right hand?" No. I'm simply hammering on and pulling off. You don't even have to press particularly hard with your left hand. You literally tap down on the fret and then pull off the string. I just figured



out how to do it quickly and then incorporate a lot of other things simultaneously. I find it easier to tap with the guitar on my lap. I can do it faster and more accurately, and it facilitates a lot more stuff, such as percussive playing. It's easier for me to do it that way than the way Andy McKee does it, for example. It's basically the same thing, just a different orientation.

Your fingerpicking technique is interesting too, because you play with what appears to be a cross between a thumbpick and a flat pick. Can you explain it?
I play with a Black Mountain thumb pick, which has a spring that allows it to fit all thumb sizes. You can use it like a flatpick or a thumbpick, and I find it more comfortable than a typical pick, and the average thumb pick, too. Some of my newer songs have a lot of strumming, and I can't strum comfortably at all with a regular thumb pick.

Your recent NPR *Tiny Desk Concert* video is wonderfully revealing. "Juvenescence" starts with traditional fingerpicking, and then you flip the guitar over mid-song into lap tap mode. How did that develop?
I do that in a few of my songs and it's mainly a compositional thing. If I imagine a bridge or a B section with tapping parts I hear in my head that I can't play upright, I figure out a way to switch during the song, and I try to make the transition as seamless as possible. "Juvenescence" works well because there's a natural pause with the harmonic ringing out. On other songs I've got give myself a maybe a millisecond for the switch to make sense. On some songs, like "I Wonder," I switch for a section that I have to play on my lap, and then I switch back.

Do you primarily work in open D Vestapol, like open E down a step, so that from low to high the strings are D A D F♯ A D?
Yes. I didn't get there by learning old blues tunes or anything like that. I was young, maybe 14 years old, when I first tuned my guitar to something that sounded good to me. I eventually looked it up and then realized that playing in open tunings was a thing. I tried out a bunch of them, and open D was still the one that spoke to me and allowed me to write the best songs. I have some songs in open G, and I've made up a few of my own tunings, including an open C suspended that I use for "Swift Breeze." From low to high, it goes C G D G B D. On my Timberline harp guitar I use a weird G tuning with an F♯ on the lowest string, but I generally use open D with a capo somewhere in the first four frets. Most people use capos to put a song in the best key for vocals, but that didn't

"I USE A CAPO TO MAKE THE SONG EASIER TO PLAY, WITH LESS STRETCHING, AND TO FIND THE KEY WHERE IT SOUNDS BEST"

occur to me. I use a capo to make the song easier to play, with less stretching, and to find the key where the song sounds best. "Juvenescence" sounds best in the key of F, so I place a Shubb Capo Royale at the third fret.

Can you detail your unique workhorse?
I play a Skytop Grand Concert, which has two big sound holes on the top side that provide a stereo effect with the sound going to my right and left ears. It's like my head is covered in sound. Skytop guitar tops don't normally have sound holes. My guitar is kind of weird because it has little holes in the top, and those occur naturally in this wood, which is like a piece of driftwood. It was underwater for a long time in the Pacific Northwest, where Teredo mollusks burrowed into the wood, and that's why it's called Teredo Sitka spruce. Since I play with the guitar on my lap a lot, the sound from the main sound holes gets muffled pointed toward my belly, I asked if there was any way to get the sound to travel out from the top a bit more, and the solution was Teredo

"PEOPLE SEND ME VIDEOS OF THEIR CHILDREN TRYING TO IMITATE ME ON THEIR LITTLE GUITARS AND UKULELES. I LOVE THAT"

Sitka, with those little natural holes that help it do that. The back and sides are made of spalted tamarind. It looks really cool, and I came to find out that spalted wood looks the way it does because of a fungus. It's so cool that the guitar has these huge natural influences, because I love nature, and that's basically what *Urban Driftwood* is all about.

In addition to solo acoustic effects staples such as the Pigtronix Infinity Looper, Strymon BigSky reverb and a ToneDexter preamp, I noticed a couple of uncommon pedals on your board.

Williams with a Timberline harp guitar

Can you share insights on the Hologram Microcosm and the Looptimus?
I love reverb so much that if I could have an entire board full of just reverb pedals, I would. I mainly use a room reverb on the BigSky that sounds good everywhere, and I also use a cathedral setting that I like to use at the end of a song. The main thing on the Microcosm is a granular delay. There are four stereo reverbs on top of that, and then there is a micro-looper on top of that. You can create some wild stuff when all of those things come together. The Microcosm is rather new to me, and I've barely scratched the surface of that pedal. I love the Pigtronix Infinity Looper because it has two inputs. So for example when I play "Jurabi" from *Urban Driftwood*, I can plug my kora into one input, my guitar into the other, get a loop going and play the song. I mainly use the Looptimus to trigger backing tracks, and I also use it to trigger synth patches from an iPad. I use my feet to trigger one of six chords, which is great because my hands are taken.

It's easy to imagine legions of players being influenced by your unique style and trying to imitate you. Have you seen much evidence of that?
Since the NPR *Tiny Desk Concert* video came out, people have been sending me videos of their small children trying to imitate me on their little guitars and ukuleles. I love that, it's so cute. I'm excited about the future for sure, and I would love to inspire a new generation of players.

KIM ATKINS

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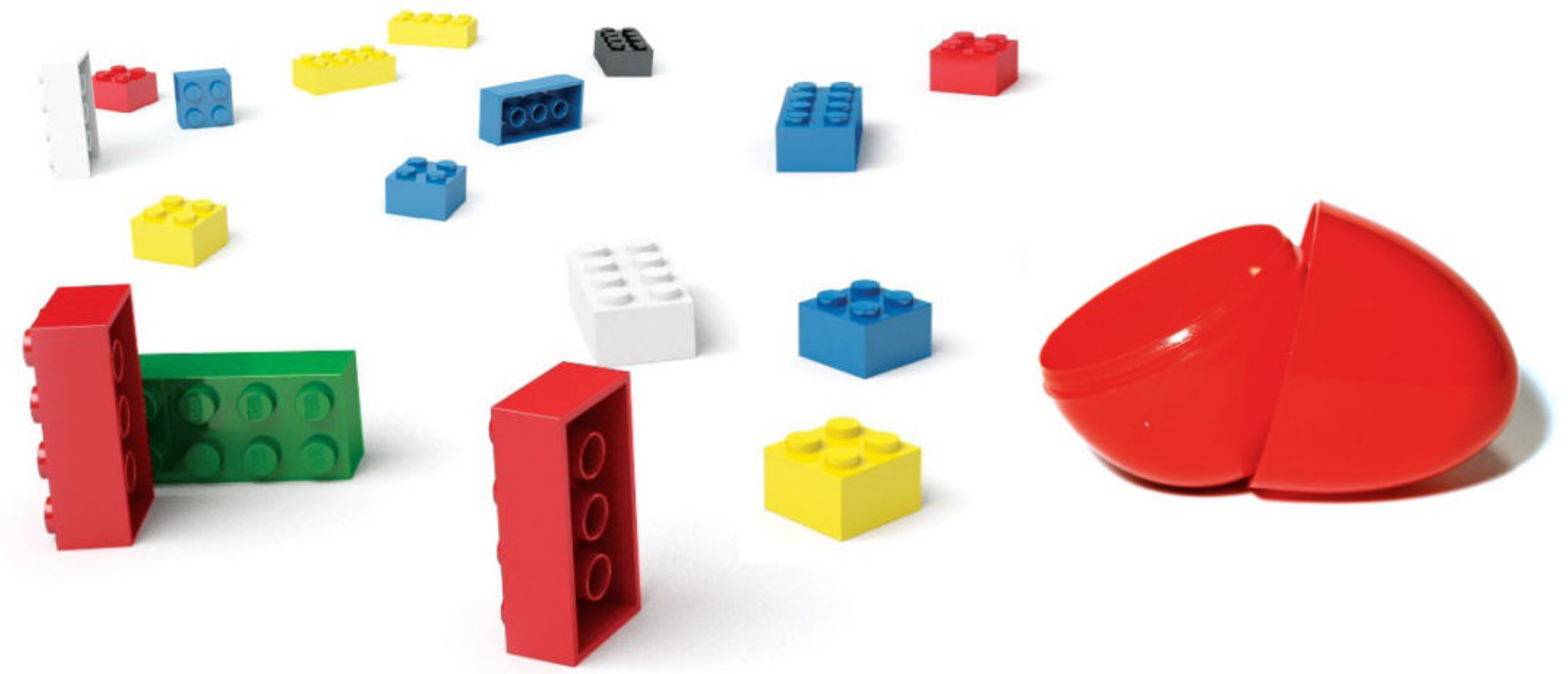


LEGO VERSUS SILLY PUTTY

How to create an inspired intro and bridge.

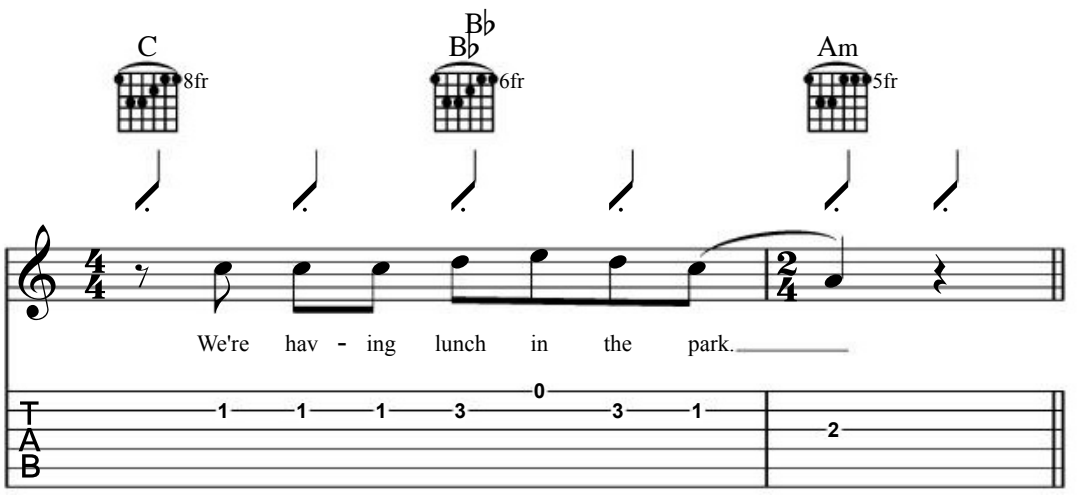
BY JEFF JACOBSON

SO YOU'RE FOOLING around on your guitar, and out of the blue comes that moment all songwriters live for but seldom experience: a burst of inspiration. You hit upon a musical idea and instantly feel in your bones that there's a song just waiting to be born. The hours pass like minutes as you magically craft an entire new song.

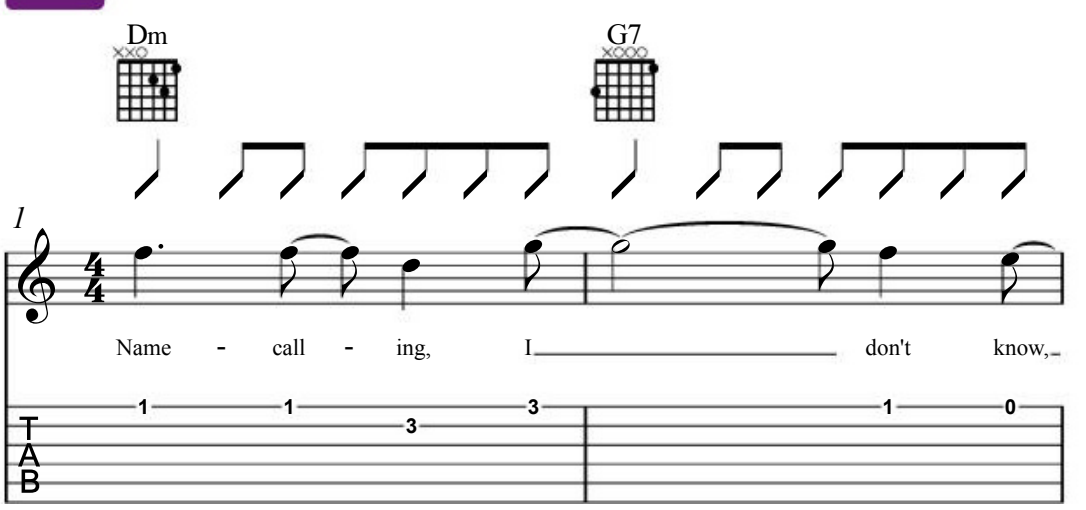
Well... almost. Inevitably, you come to realize that you're missing a section or two. Unfortunately, the initial, glorious epiphany has faded, and you're now faced with the hard work of writing. While any section could be missing, in my experience this challenge often involves creating an intro and/or a bridge section. For that reason, we'll focus on those two sections in this lesson.

So how does one create an intro or bridge out of thin air? I have two contrary approaches that I call Lego and Silly Putty. It works like this: You can think of writing a song as snapping sections onto each other, like building with Lego blocks. After all, adding a bridge that's completely unrelated to the

Ex. 1 Folky pop, shuffle ♩ = 114 (♫ = ♩³ ♪)



Ex. 2



GARYKAZ/GETTY IMAGES (SILLY PUTTY)

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For audio of this lesson, go to **guitarplayer.com/jan22-lesson1**

rest of a song can yield great results. But coming up with something from nothing can be as daunting as an author's blank page. So when I find myself in a jam, I like to take the Silly Putty approach: Instead of thinking of a song as Lego pieces, let's think of it as a kernel of musical inspiration, represented by a ball of Silly Putty. This malleable substance can be stretched in all directions to create something much larger, but all of it is ultimately pulled from the existing putty of that one small ball.

In musical terms, the Silly Putty approach allows you to write entirely new sections of music born out of what you've already been inspired to write, and this connection is most often imperceptible to the listener. The new sections just feel right and are tailor-made for your song.

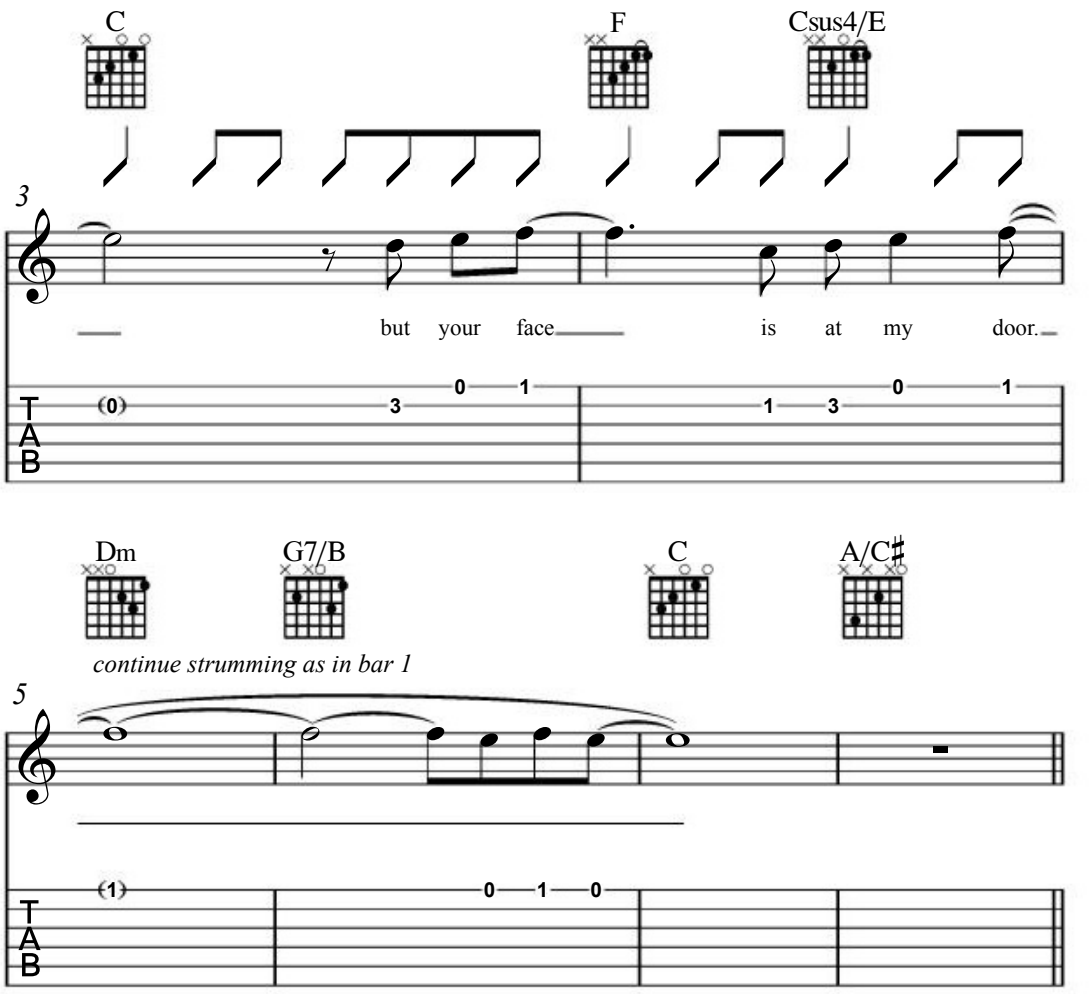
Let's get started with our first scenario: We're stuck without a bridge and our original wave of inspiration has crashed — or has it?

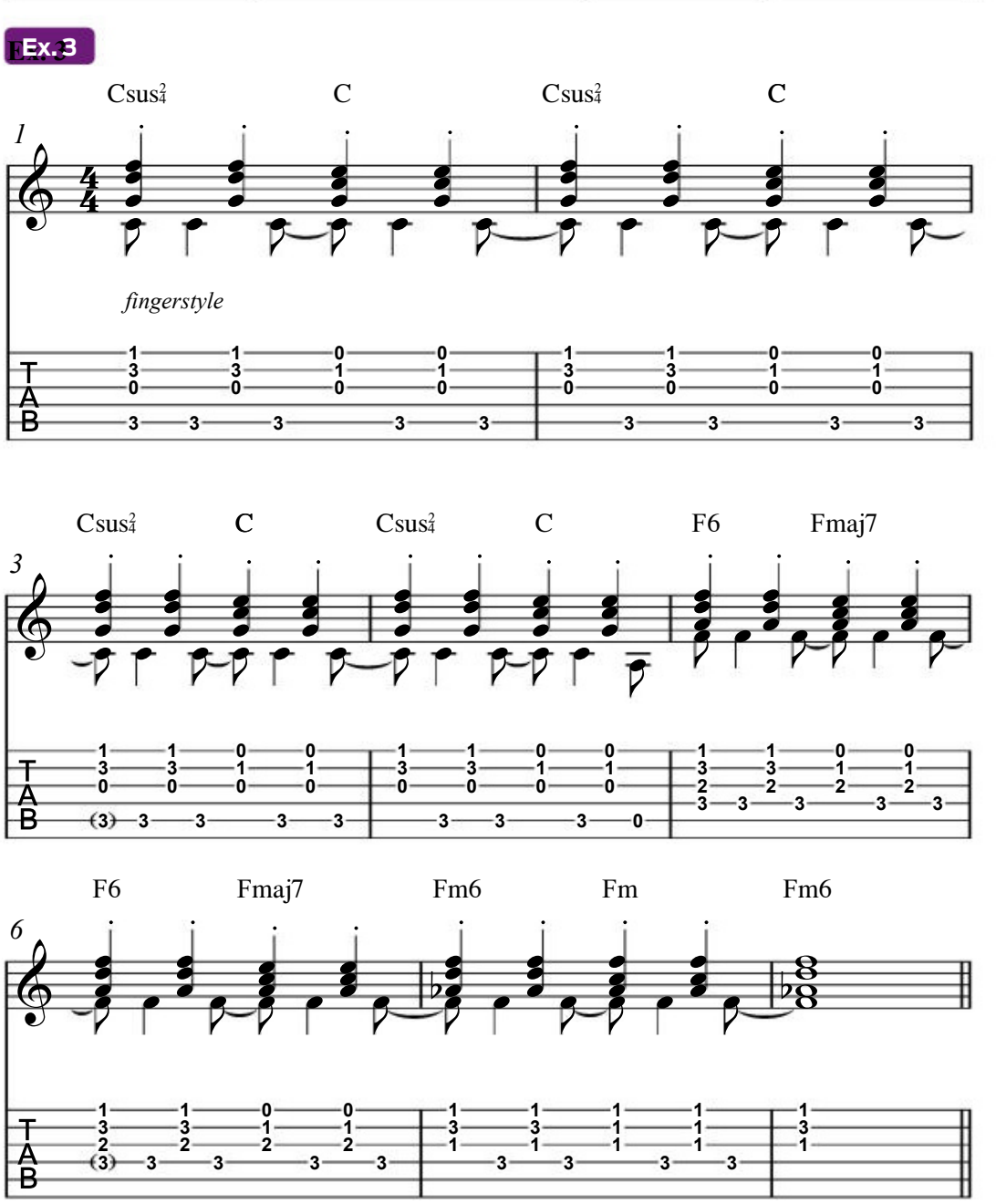
If you're a songwriter, you've likely experienced this sudden kind of inspiration. (Or you will.) For me, it once came during a break in rehearsal when I was leaning against a wall, mindlessly strumming. Out of nowhere, I played three chords and sang, "We're having lunch in the park" (**Ex. 1**). (Note that all audio is taken from my live EP *Lunch in the Park*, recorded with my guitar tuned down one whole step to allow for a more comfortable vocal range. Your standard-tuned guitar will sound a whole step higher than the audio.)

But who's having lunch? And what park? I had no idea, but the burst of inspiration continued for the next few days, until I had a new song I was genuinely excited about but which sorely needed a bridge. Unfortunately, the spark was gone, and I was out of ideas.

My first thought was, This song doesn't really need a bridge, right? But as much as I tried to convince myself, I knew that it most certainly did. Looking back, I can see that I used the Silly Putty strategy, even though I didn't think of it that way at the time.

In the second chorus, there's a G7/B chord that I always looked forward to

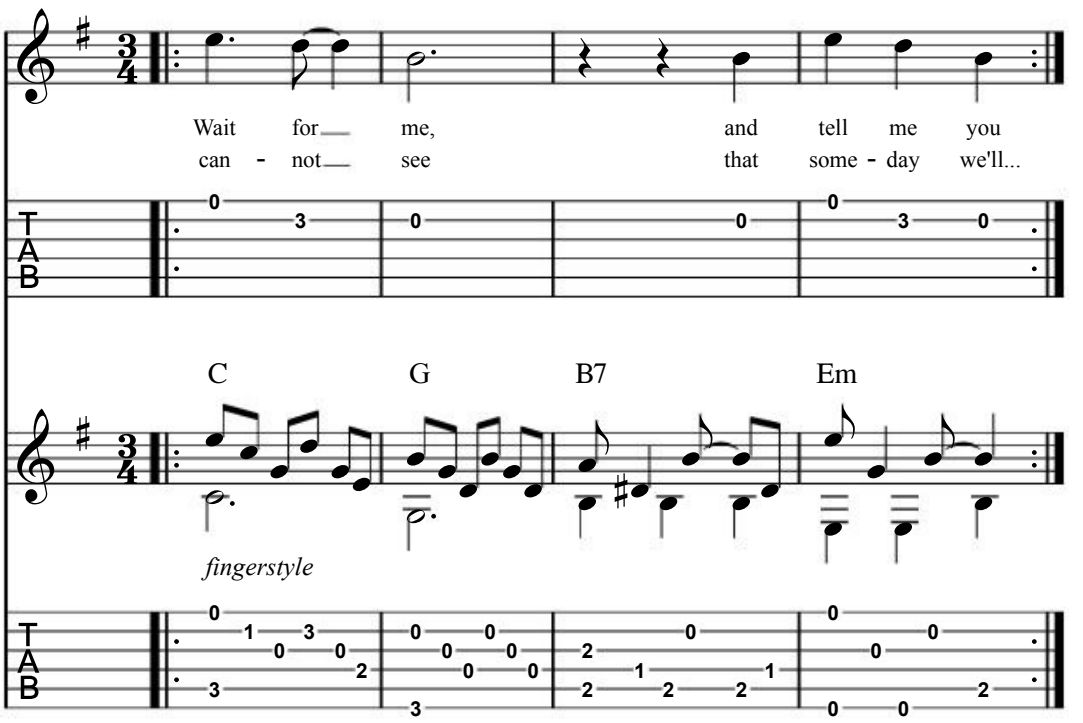


Ex. 3

playing (see **Ex. 2**, bar 6). There was just something about it. But there was no time to explore it because it was smack in the middle of the chorus. So I thought, Why not take that chord and create an entirely new section? Sure, but how? I stopped and took a closer look. What did I like about that chord so much? Why did it catch my ear? Turns out it was the top two notes, D and F; I can't explain why, but together they just resonated with me. So I kept them and started noodling (an underrated activity) until I had changed the bass note from B to C, resulting in a chord voicing I hadn't played before – Csus2/4 (**Ex. 3**, bar 1). The suspended notes then lent themselves to resolving to a simple C chord, as you can see in the example. But adding this resolution made the original chord that had gotten me there, our friend G7/B, expendable, as I couldn't create the same suspension/resolution theme I had hit upon. So I let it go. And doing so allowed me to find other chords with which I could create that same resolution. While the end result was a common chord progression in the key of C — C - F - Fm — along with it came a new musical theme. Plus, I found myself playing a completely new rhythmic pattern by dropping the pick and plucking the strings with my fingers. Now I was onto something and quickly tied up any loose ends.

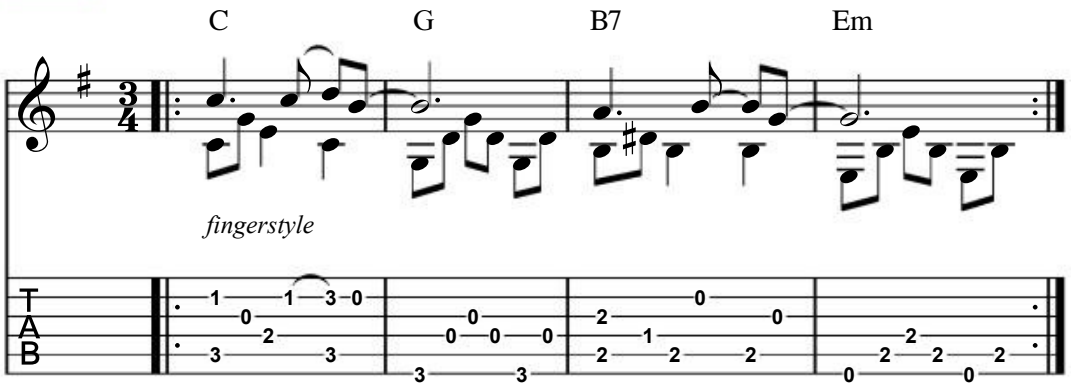
Was this inspiration? Yes, but of a different sort. In music, as in life, some things simply lead to others, and we just have to find our way to the place where we can make this happen. That is the crux of the approach: Out of one chord came an entirely new section, which doesn't even have that chord in it anymore. Yet this new bridge is still directly related to the song's DNA. All I did was stretch the Silly Putty.

Now, let's take the same approach, this time to create an intro. One day, I stumbled onto the chorus for what would become a song called "Sunshine" (**Ex. 4**). I rode the wave and finished writing most of it. But when I found I was missing an intro, I again unconsciously looked inward to how I liked the way the guitar doubled most

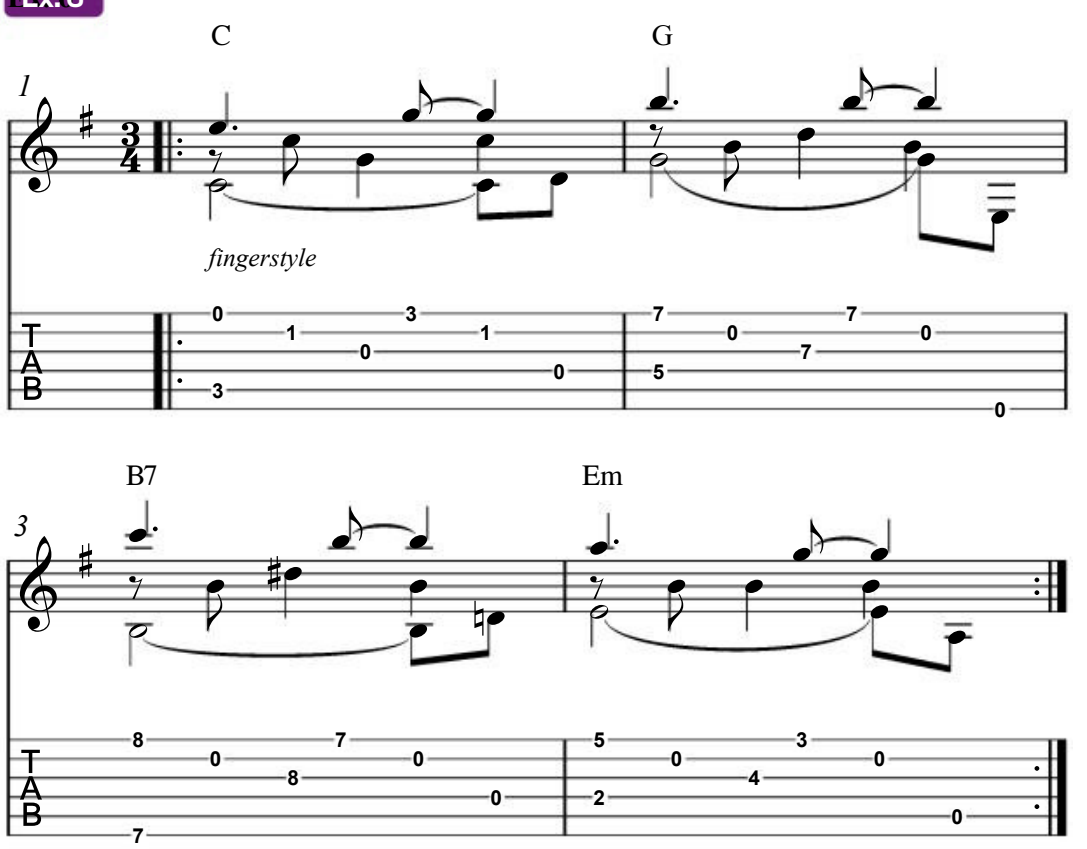
Ex. 4 **Ballad** ♩ = 136



Ex. 5



Ex. 6



of the chorus vocal melody. Why not try to play the whole melody and make that the intro? So I did! And the result was the most boring intro you can imagine.

Still, I liked the idea of playing those chords with a melody on top. So I went back to noodling, and before I knew it, I had come up with a brand-new melody over the very same chords (**Ex. 5**). And this time, it had "intro" written all over it. Mission accomplished. But I wasn't done yet, as surprisingly, I also found another higher melody using different voicings of the same chords, which became a brief interlude (**Ex. 6**).

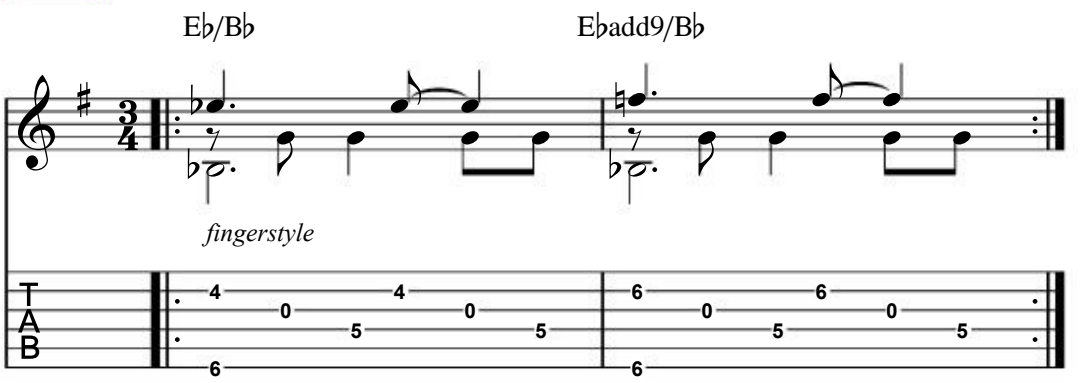
Throughout the song, I also play a short, two-bar theme based around an E♭/B♭ chord, which takes the song somewhere new for a moment (**Ex. 7**). For you theory heads, we're in G major; E♭ is the ♭VI chord, borrowed from the parallel minor key of G minor. When I was faced with the cold reality that I also needed a bridge, I fooled around with the E♭/B♭ (also known as "noodling") and found that the 2nd-string E♭ - F melody was just begging to move up to G. Plus, I really liked the timbre of the droning open G string, so I was going to keep that for sure.

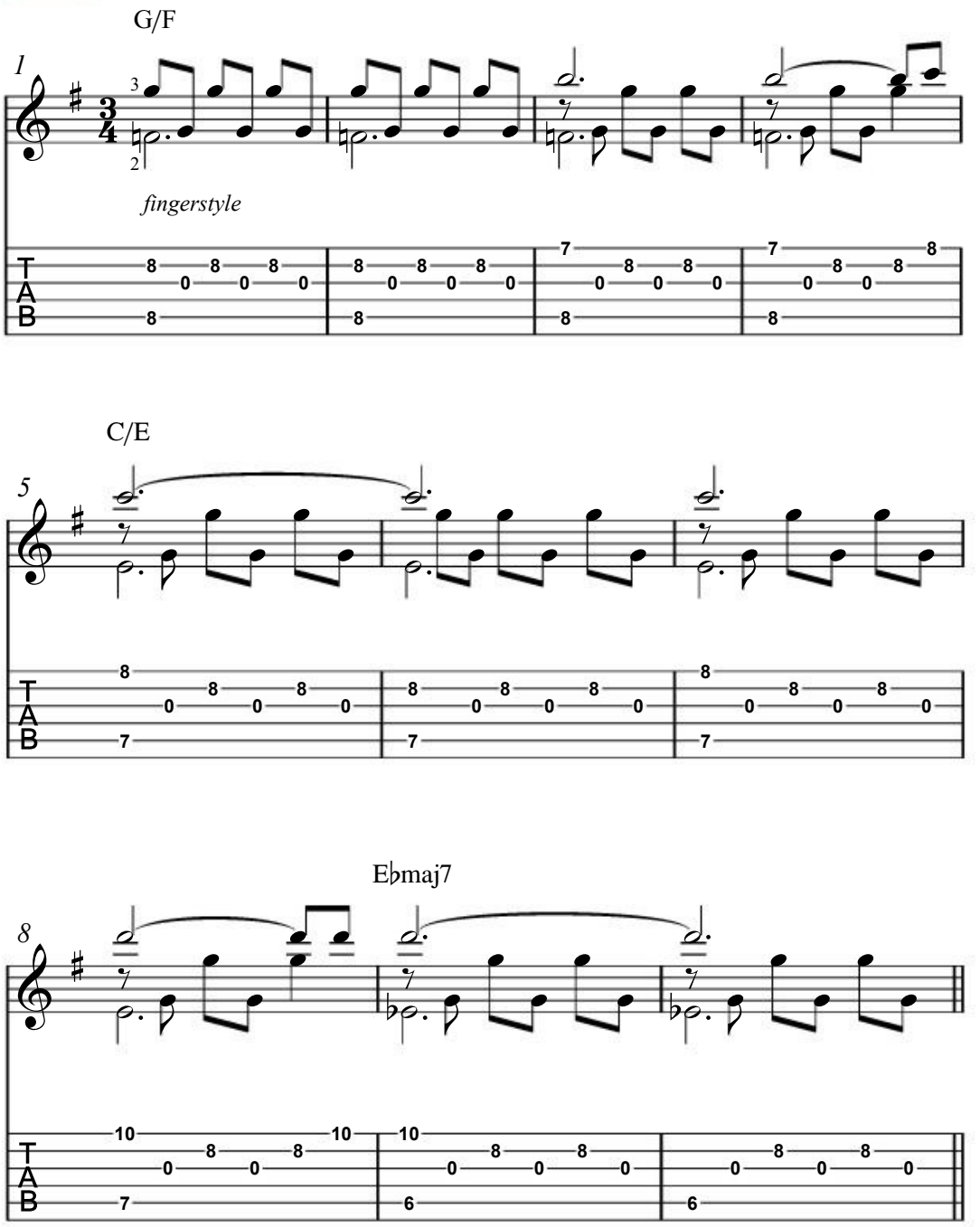
Looking back, even more than the E♭/B♭ chord itself, which I eventually left behind, it's that simple droning open G note that ended up being the core of the new section. And along with the aforementioned G on the 2nd string, I now had two drones, an octave apart! I was off to the races, because drones immediately lend themselves to adding moving lines above or below them (think "bagpipes"). So I did just that, and in what seemed like no time, I had a sort of mini classical piece that serves as the song's bridge (**Ex. 8**).

Now where did that come from? Like a matryoshka doll, it came from a simple open G string inside of a chord that I liked, inside of a section with no room to explore it. And that section was written way back during the original "big bang" of inspiration.

As songwriters, we are all faced with songs that have missing sections, with no inspiration in sight. But instead of immediately turning to an outside, Lego-type solution, it's worth taking a step back to look for a small meaningful moment in the music you've already written. In many cases, it's calling out to you. Take that moment, get inside of it, and discover a new burst of inspiration. What's different is this one doesn't come looking for you; you have to find it. Oh, and don't forget to noodle!

Ex. 7

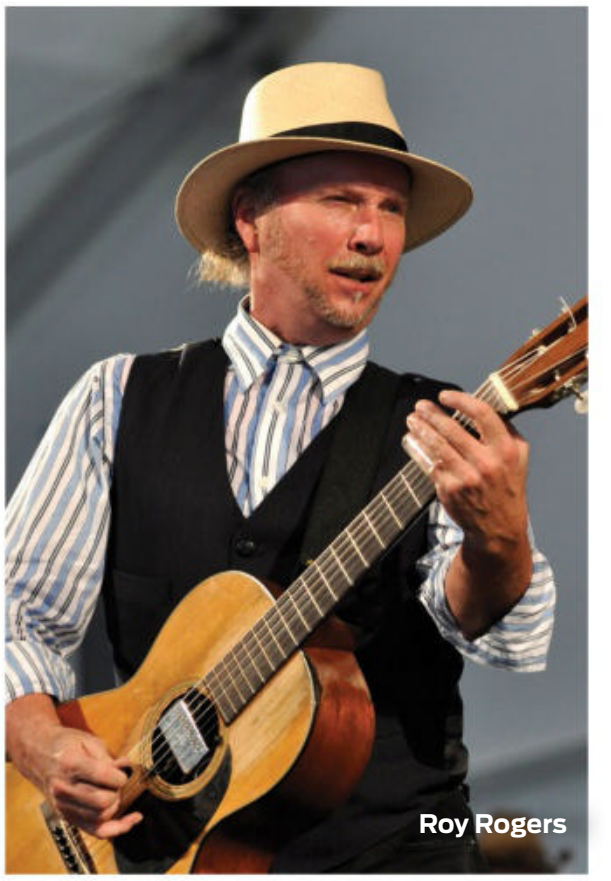


Ex. 8

Acoustic Blues Musings, Pt. 4

Slide song suggestions with insights from Ben Harper and Roy Rogers.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

Ben Harper


Roy Rogers

THEIR AMPED-UP ELECTRIFIED cousins may garner the lion's share of modern limelight, but acoustic guitars and slides have gone hand and hand throughout the history of the blues, and they always will. As I researched last month's column on open roots tunings with the knowledge that this one would focus on slide, it was a challenge to find prime historic examples where the artist didn't incorporate at least some bottleneck. Here are a few that do, and a few more contemporary ones too.

SLIDE BLUES TUNES

In Ben Harper's August 2018 Frets feature, he said, "Blind Willie Johnson is the mojo hand for steel guitar. Start with 'Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground,' tuned to open D. Low to high, it goes D A D F♯ A D. You can also take that tuning up or down a step, and it's sometimes called Vestapol tuning."

A fine folk blues example of Vestapol E would be Brian Jones' slide on the Rolling Stones' "No Expectations." For a cool Keef example on resonator in the open C tuning we touched on (low to high C G C G C E), check out the Stones' dirge version of "You Gotta Move." John Butler Trio's "Betterman" is a good modern example on a 12-string (actually his 11-string Maton) guitar.

Open "Spanish" G (low to high, D G D G B D) is perhaps the most historic and common tuning used for songs like Robert Johnson's original recording (and Led Zeppelin's cover) of "Traveling Riverside Blues" (Johnson's is either capoed up a step and a half, or the recording is sped up). As noted here last month, Son House's "Death Letter Blues" is another seminal example. It also exemplifies the ripping sound of a resonator being played with a steel slide on the third finger, which leads to a deeper discussion.

IN OPEN TUNINGS, THE WORLD OF SLIDE GUITAR IS AT ONE'S FINGERTIPS. WHICH FINGER YOU USE IS UP TO YOU

MOJO FINGER

Once in open tunings, the world of slide guitar is at one's fingertips. Which finger you use is up to you, and the same basic considerations that apply to electric apply to acoustic as well.

With that said, most teachers would advise a slinky pinkie if possible, because it leaves the other three free to work behind the slide. Roy Rogers agrees. "I prefer the little finger so I can fret chords more easily than using, say, the third finger," the Delta blues master says. "But, remember, there is no right way or wrong way. Players have to figure it out for themselves."

Since acoustic strings are heavier, there is obvious logic in using a thicker finger for more power, like Son House. Regardless of the digit, an acoustic produces far less sustain and significantly more string noise, so it's perhaps even more important to be laser-focused on the fret line, pluck clean and true with perhaps a slightly heavier pick or more fingernail than one might on an electric, and use plenty of vibrato to create frictional string energy, like rubbing two sticks together.

Some players, like ace Sonny Landreth, swap slides when switching from an electric to an acoustic guitar. Next month we'll delve deeper into how string and slide weights and materials factor into various approaches with more insights from Rogers, as well as hip tips from Landreth and the legendary Leo Kottke.

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THE BEST GEAR OF 2021

WHAT IN THE WORLD OF GUITAR GEAR GOT US EXCITED IN 2021? *GUITAR PLAYER*'S EDITORS AND REVIEWERS PICK THEIR FAVORITES.

BY DAVE HUNTER, JIMMY LESLIE, JAMES VOLPE ROTONDI, CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI AND ART THOMPSON

GIBSON CUSTOM SHOP
MURPHY LAB LES PAUL, ES-335 AND ES-355 GUITARS

A revitalized Gibson introduced its Murphy Lab extension of the Custom Shop early in 2021, and that thrillingly accurate backward glance proved one of the more exciting new developments from a big-name maker in quite some time. Tom Murphy has long been recognized as a leading practitioner of the art of aging Gibson guitars, and if someone had told us the 1959 Les Paul Heavy Aged, 1959 ES-355 Light Aged, and 1961 ES-335 Ultra-Light Aged we were sent for testing were rare under-the-bed vintage finds we wouldn't have thought twice. And not only did they look great, but Custom Shop build quality ensure they also played superbly and sounded authentic. Stellar stuff. **$8,999, $7,499 and $5,799 respectively. gibson.com** —DH

ORANGE
ACOUSTIC PEDAL

This is an ideal preamp and flexible D.I. for acoustic rockers after an amp-like tone. It simply makes any acoustic-electric guitar sound bigger and bolder without having to fuss with a bunch of complicated controls. The main event is the very sculptable midrange along with the requisite bass and treble controls. Tweak them a bit for different applications or instruments, but most players can probably pretty much set 'em and forget 'em. I was miffed about no mute or bypass button at first but needed a mutable tuner in line anyway. Once the ample-sounding Orange Acoustic Pedal tone colors the signal chain, going without it sounds black and white. **$169 street. orangeamps.com** —JL

MESA
BADLANDER

Derived from a long line of high-gain Mesa Rectifier amplifiers, this EL34-powered two-channel 100-watt head (also available in combo, rack-mount and 50-watt versions) delivers an astounding range of tones courtesy of Mesa's 3 Mode Channel Cloning system that provides independent switching of the Clean, Crunch and Crush modes on each channel, each of which offers different gain and voicing options. Dialing in righteous clean and overdriven tones is facilitated by the independent gain, master and EQ controls, and there's a front-panel switch to select 100-, 50- or 20-watt operation (all class A/B), a tube-buffered series FX loop, a trio of speaker jacks and a bias switch to configure the amp for EL34 or 6L6 power tubes. The features are extensive, but one of the most significant is the Cab Clone IR, a cab-simulator/reactive load with eight Mesa miked-cabinet IRs that can also be loaded with IRs of your choice. It adds up to a magnificently well-endowed amp that's also an amazing deal. **$2,299, 100-watt; $1,999, 50-watt; $2,199, 50-watt combo. mesaboogie.com** —AT

REVEREND
GRISTLE 90

Guitarist Greg Koch went off-road when creating a follow-up to his signature Tele-centric Gristlemaste, and the result is the Gristle 90, a mashup of Fender and Gibson attributes that features a korina body that's chambered under the pickguard and has a Firebird-style raised center section, and a three-piece korina set-neck topped with a 24 3/4-inch scale, 22-fret ebony fingerboard. Steering things further into Gibson territory, the Gristle 90 has a Bigsby vibrato and a Tune-o-matic bridge, and it sports a pair of P-90 pickups — specifically, Fishman Fluence Gristle 90s, which were voiced by Koch and crew for this guitar. They feed volume and tone controls — the latter with a push-pull switch for a Peter Green-type out-of-phase sound — along with a pushbutton midrange boost and a three-way selector. The Gristle 90 is a great playing and superb sounding guitar that combines classic and cutting-edge technologies to create a T-styler like no other. **$1,799 reverendguitars.com** —AT

EPIPHONE
USA CASINO

This updated and revitalized USA Casino — the first built in the U.S. since 1971 — absolutely nails what makes the iconic hollow-body Casino great: from big, bold British jangle and punch to sexy, syrupy P-90 jazz and blues tones. The solid mahogany, 22-fret, rounded-C neck is topped with an Indian rosewood fingerboard, and with its three-ply maple/poplar/maple top, Gibson ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge and thinline trapeze tailpiece, it's a contoured classic in either Royal Tan or Vintage Sunburst nitro finishes. While it may cost a pretty penny compared to the Asia-made Epiphone Casinos of even a few years ago, the USA Casino is worth the investment, bringing the model back to the premium U.S.-made dream machine it was always meant to be. **$2,699 street. epiphone.com** —JVR

BOSS
OC-5 OCTAVE

The OC-5 builds on the legacy of the OC-2, introduced 40 years ago, with a spot-on re-creation of the original monophonic pedal as well as a Poly mode that delivers the OC-3's chord-loving goodness. It ups the ante with a +1 octave control that adds definition and chime to guitar lines, and a -2 octave that in Poly mode becomes a range control for the -1 octave, allowing you to place the sub on just the root of the chord or over all the notes being played. Boss's latest tracking technology delivers lightning-fast, glitch-free performance, producing a natural sound and feel even on bends and vibrato. Better still, its suboctave sounds more natural than that of its predecessors. **$129 street. boss.info** —CS

EVENTIDE
MICROPITCH DELAY

The MicroPitch Delay is a stereo delay with controls to independently adjust pitch for the left and right channels, as well as pitch-modulation capabilities courtesy of an LFO, and an envelope that responds dynamically to your playing. The little red box is awesome for delay, chorus and doubling effects, but that is just the tip of this iceberg. The secondary mod parameter lets you choose from three types of pitch modulation: via LFO, via envelope to raise pitch, and via envelope to lower pitch. These last two methods are great for creating dynamically responsive pitch shifts. It's also terrific for creating syrupy chorus and ascending and descending delays via picking dynamics. I found that, at its core, the MicroPitch Delay is a fantastic "always-on" sonic enhancer in my signal chain. **$279. eventideaudio.com** —CS

FENDER
AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL JAZZMASTER II

If you're like us, you've wanted a Jazzmaster for years. What held you back was those notoriously wonky vibrato tailpieces and the humpy 7.5-inch neck radius. Well, the American Professional II is for you, with a redesigned Panorama tremolo system that gives you all the bending room of a Strat, updated V-Mod II pickups, and — finally! — a more comfortable rounded-C neck shape, with a modern 9.5-inch neck radius. Hallelujah! The V-Mod II single-coil pickups kick indie ass, too: clear, punchy and articulate, with a coil-tap option for a beefier sound out of that previously thin bridge pup in most Jazzers. With the American Professional II, Fender has given us all the Jazzmaster's cool character, with absolutely zero trade-offs. **$1,599 street. fender.com** —JVR

EPIPHONE
"INSPIRED BY GIBSON" HUMMINGBIRD

Comparable in nearly every detail to its much-pricier U.S.-made Gibson counterpart, the new made-in-China Epiphone Hummingbird features that classic square-shouldered dreadnought shape, a solid Sitka Spruce top, solid-mahogany back and sides, Indian Laurel reverse-belly bridge with bone saddle, tortoise shell pickguard with Hummingbird and floral graphics, a glued-in, tapered dovetail neck joint, quarter-sawn spruce bracing, ivory-and-black six- and four-ply binding and an Aged Gloss finish. Specs aside, it just plays and sounds great, with a 24.72-inch-scale mahogany neck with rounded-C profile, a 12-inch radius, and a lovely Indian laurel fingerboard. Finally, a Hummingbird for the rest of us. **$799 street. epiphone.com** —JVR

ESP MH-1000 DELUXE EVERTUNE

An Editors' Pick Award mysteriously went missing from this review when it appeared in the November 2021 issue, but the MH-1000 Deluxe Evertune certainly earned one. This beautifully made guitar offers righteous playability thanks to its three-piece set-thru maple neck with a thin U shape and a 25.5-inch-scale Macassar ebony fingerboard carrying 24 mirror-polished, stainless-steel frets. The guitar swings a pair of active EMG pickups — a 60T W-R in the neck position and an 81 in the bridge slot — and the tone knob pulls for split-coil action. As the name denotes, this version of the MH-1000 Deluxe features an Evertune bridge that provides rock-solid tuning stability and unprecedented intonation accuracy, and can be easily adjusted for the desired string-bending response. The Evertune is a game changer and the MH-1000 Deluxe an ideal platform to showcase its abilities. **$1,299. espguitars.com** —AT

ORANGE
TERROR STAMP

Perfect for mounting on a pedalboard, this potent little amplifier is a hybrid design that uses a 12AX7 tube in the preamp driving a 20-watt solid-state power section. A single foot-switch toggles between volume 1 and volume 2 controls, and there's a Shape knob for EQing sounds and a master gain control. The speaker output can handle 8- and 16-ohm loads, and there's an FX loop and a cab-simulated output for recording, headphones or feeding a FOH mixer. The Terror Stamp has a wide gain range and its British-flavored distortion is killer for everything from blues to hard rock. It's a great pedal to keep in the gig-bag in case your main amp goes down, or as a full-time amplifier for players who want to reduce the amount of gear they carry to the gig. **$199. orangeamps.com** —AT

NEURAL DSP
QUAD CORTEX FLOOR MODELER

When it comes to the industry-leading amp modelers, guitarists have stopped debating whether they sound like the real thing and just started using them. In doing so, many have developed strong loyalties to their DSP delivery unit of choice, which led to some ruffled features and muddied waters when plug-in designer Neural DSP unveiled this Quad Cortex floor unit. Boasting an extremely intuitive interface with touch screen and combination rotary-knob-foot-switch gizmos and the ability to capture and reproduce any amp, drive pedal or cab you throw at it, the main takeaway is that the Quad Cortex simply sounds astoundingly good, immediately establishing it as a serious contender for anything out there. **$1,849 street. neuraldsp.com/quad-cortex** —DH

ORIGIN EFFECTS
REVIVAL DRIVE COMPACT

When you notice that your pals have the same new overdrive pedal on their boards, you know something is up. With its amp-like circuit design and chewy, touch-responsive sag and bloom, the original Revival Drive caused a massive stir a few years back, but it's a big pedal. The Revival Drive Compact packs that same spongy saturation into a fly-rig-approved form factor, and does it sound good. Is it the "tube amp-style signal path with Class A preamp"? Or maybe the "long-tail pair phase inverter" or the "reactive overdrive design"? It's both those things, plus EQ options for single-coil or double-coil pickups and a wet/dry control so you can blend your amp's preamp gain with the Revival Drive's tailored gain structure. Put away your ideas about what an overdrive pedal sounds like, and pull out your wallet. **$390 street. origineffects.com** —JVR

EARTHQUAKER DEVICES
ASTRAL DESTINY REVERB

EarthQuaker's line of out-of-this-world ambience pedals grew this year with Astral Destiny, a mind-blowing box that serves up eight types of ambience with and some without octave effects. These huge-sounding reverbs include chorus modulation that makes them sound ethereal or haunting, shimmer effects for upper and lower octaves, and high and low octave effects. All this, plus a regenerating tail for creating reverbs of extended length at pitch or fifth above, as well as upward and downward pitch bending. Astral Destiny is a welcome new tone enhancer and an inspiring effect for guitarists who seek uncommon reverbs. **$199. earthquakerdevices.com** —CS

K-LINE
SPRINGFIELD

Just when you concluded that everyone and his or her second cousin is making reproduction S-style, bolt-neck, 25.5-inch-scale guitars, along comes one to remind you how magical this 67-year-old recipe can still be when cooked up very, very well. Chris Kroenlein's Springfield model wowed us for its superb playability, authentically played-in feel, resonant and lightweight woods, lusciously aged nitro Lake Placid Blue finish (non-aged available), and trenchant tones. From the archetypally Stratty mix of bright, glassy, snappy, and quacky, to muscular, rich, and multi-dimensional, it's the compelling and inspiring performer many players believe they'll find only in a vintage example costing much, much more. **$2,650 direct/ street. klineguitars.com** —DH

L.R. BAGGS
VOICEPRINT ACOUSTIC D.I.

Released in fall 2020 with a significant firmware update in 2021, the Voiceprint D.I. is one of the most innovative products released during the pandemic era. Using Impulse Response signal processing and harnessing the power of an iPhone or Apple Watch via the AcousticLive app, Voiceprint conjures a custom filter designed to augment/replace the pickup signal based on a quick demo performance, essentially creating the best version of your favorite instrument for amplification. That "Voiceprint" then lives in the pedal and can be further sculpted using the app to adjust EQ or volume, reduce feedback or vary the blend. Store up to 99 Voiceprints for an entire acoustic arsenal. **$399 street. lrbaggs.com** —JL

FENDER
ACOUSTIC JUNIOR GO

This little bugger sounds surprisingly toneful and does pretty much anything a troubadour might imagine. The GO's got a bevy of effects including a built-in looper, plus Bluetooth connectivity that comes in handy for pumping backing tracks or simply rocking out to tunes sent over from a phone. Dual guitar/vocal channels with identical setups are easy to understand and operate. A perfectly portable compact brown box housing a powerful rechargeable lithium-ion battery is the GO's coup de grace. Robust enough to turn any patch of nature into a stage, it was even the main amplifier for all of the acoustic instruments and even some of the electric ones at our Burning Man camp! **$499 street; MGT-4 foot switch, $64 street. fender.com** —JL

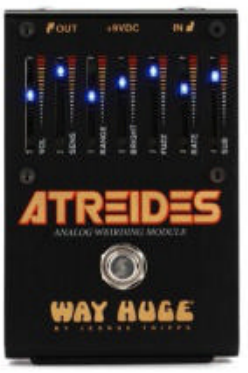
EPIPHONE
ALEX LIFESON LES PAUL STANDARD ACCESS

Here's an all-around axe if there ever was one, and it's attainable to practically anyone serious about acquiring a total tone machine. First, it's a gorgeous, utterly playable and ergonomically excellent Les Paul with push/pull coil-tap capability on both humbuckers. Second, it's got a piezo pickup in the Floyd Rose-style, whammy-friendly locking Graph Tech Ghost Tremolo Bridge, and that signal can either be separated via a second output jack, or summed with the magnetic signal in the primary output. Remarkably, Epiphone and Lifeson realized this dream machine for under a grand. **$899 street. epiphone.com** —AT

THE BEST OF 2021 EDITORS' PICKS

MATCHLESS
LAUREL CANYON REVERB 1x12

California amp maker Matchless has been at the forefront of the boutique scene since 1989, but the Laurel Canyon and its sibling Coldwater Canyon are the first production models it has released with 6V6 output tubes—to which we say it's about time! Announced prior to this past year but put on hold review-wise due to pandemic-related constraints, the Laurel Canyon quickly proved that the high-quality, point-to-point Matchless formula applies equally well to American-voiced designs, while also establishing a new 20-watt club combo to beat. From lush blooming chime, to biting mid-rich twang to snarling lead tones, all with outstanding reverb slathered over, it's impressively versatile and a real joy to play. **$2,780 street. matchlessamplifiers.com** —DH



WAY HUGE
ATREIDES ANALOG WEIRDING MODULE

Atreides is a stellar reimagination of the short-lived but influential 1980 Electro-Harmonix Mini Synthesizer that Eddie Van Halen used to great effect on *Fair Warning* tracks like "Sunday Afternoon in the Park" and "One Foot Out the Door." A guitar synth, envelope filter, fuzz circuit, phaser, and sub-octave device all in one, pimped out with seven satisfying sliders for sensitivity, brightness, phaser rate, and more, it's sure to help evoke the hallucinogenic "spice" that brings visions and messianic dreams to its *Dune* namesake, Paul Atreides. **$199 street. jimdunlop.com** —JVR

CARR
SUPER BEE

Dressed in natty two-tone covering and designed to deliver three different flavors of blackface-Fender tone, the Super Bee has a rotary Sting switch that selects "64" (based on Steve Carr's personal '64 Deluxe Reverb), "68" (a classic Super Reverb) and "72" (a blackface circuit modded for extra overdrive). Powering this point-to-point wired amp is a pair of 6BM8 tubes that combine a high-gain triode and a power pentode in one glass package. The pair produce 10 watts, which can be throttled down to two watts via the attenuator switch or all the way down to a whisper with the attenuator knob. Two 12AX7s and a 12AT7 handle the EQ (treble, bass, middle) and drive/recovery duties for the lush and enveloping reverb. The Super Bee offers a cool selection of sounds that range from rich Deluxe Reverb flavors to midrange-forward Super Reverb clean and overdriven tones to gnarly distortion from the 72 setting that's so dynamic and touch responsive you could play an entire gig on this mode alone. **$2,490. carramps.com** —AT

DAMIAN PROBETT
SG-TEOR GUITAR

With a diverse background in carpentry and joinery, aircraft tool making and the building of engines for racing motorcycles, London-based luthier Damian Probett shouldn't have much trouble pulling off a meticulously well-crafted electric guitar — and he most definitely did not on evidence of the SG-Teor that graced *GP*'s New & Cool pages early in 2021. Partly inspired by a "what if?" wish list from American guitarist Matte Henderson, Probett captured the spirit and overall sound of a vintage SG in a single-cutaway design that improved balance, eliminated neck-dive and "rubber neck" tuning-wobble issues, and enhanced sonic stability and sustain in the process. The result is a stunning performance tool that's all the more versatile thanks to stealthy split-coil pickup switching. **$4,899 direct. probettguitars.com** —DH

TAYLOR
GRAND THEATER 811E & K21E

Depending on your perspective, these are either two of the best little big guitars or big little guitars of 2021. Taylor notched out a nice niche between a short scale travel-sized axe and a full scale small-bodied instrument, then made it super playable by lowering the string tension for a remarkably relaxed feel that's perfect for the beach, the boat or the back porch. C-Class cantilevered bracing helps the Grand Theater's tone belie its diminutive box, and onboard ES2 electronics make it truly gig-worthy. **811e, $2,999 street; K21e, $4,699 street. taylorguitars.com** —JL

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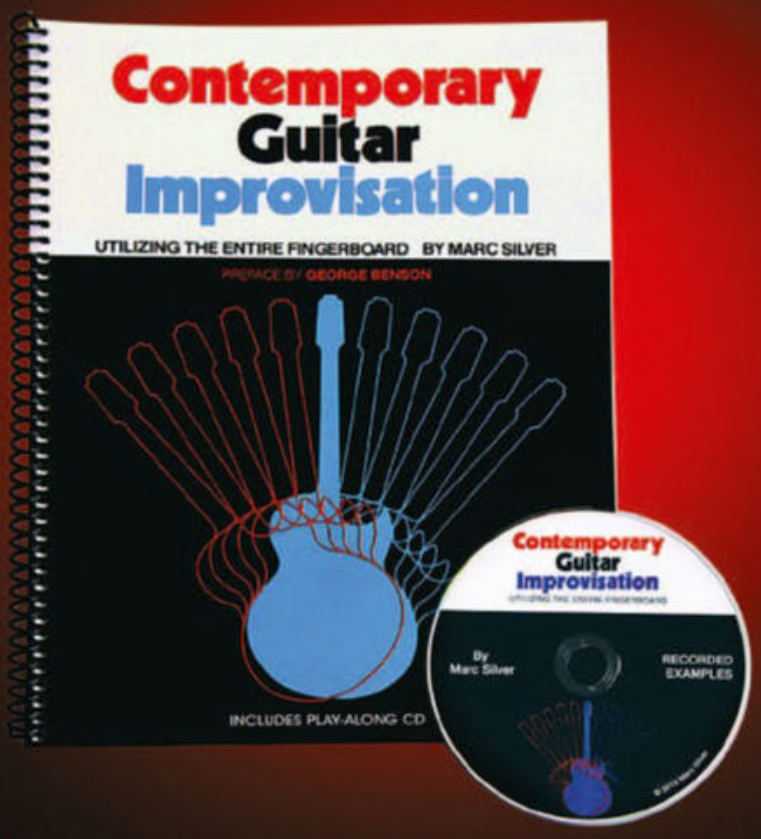

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Contemporary Guitar Improvisation is the single most important book I ever studied."

Chris Pelonis
Lead Guitarist and Musical Director for Jeff Bridges and The Abiders

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GIBSON SG SPECIAL ▲

This early ’60s-style SG Special has the vibe and sound heard on countless classic-rock recordings. Features include a comfortable SlimTaper mahogany neck, a bound rosewood fingerboard, two P-90 pickups, a three-way toggle switch and hand-wired controls with Orange Drop capacitors. The SG Special is available in Vintage Cherry and Ebony gloss nitrocellulose lacquer finishes, and comes with a hardshell case. **$1,599. gibson.com**

DEAN CUSTOM RUN #16 ML ▲

The long-awaited limited Dean Custom Run returns with number 16. This ML in sandblasted grey has a swamp-ash body, a three-piece mahogany neck with 24 jumbo frets, an Evertune bridge and Fishman Fluence Moderns in black chrome. The production run is limited to 100 pieces. **$1,799. deanguitars.com**

NEW F

THE NEW YEAR APPROACHES WITH A HOARD OF GREAT GUITARS, AMPS, PEDALS AND ACCESSORIES.

ERNIE BALL MUSIC MAN
MAJESTY HYDROSPACE ▲

Limited to just 175 six-string models and 75 seven-string models, the John Petrucci signature Majesty Hydrospace features a carved quilt top and alder back and sides, with matching flame-maple headstock. The three-piece Honduran mahogany/flamed-maple neck is visible through a translucent gloss-blue finish on the back and has 24 stainless-steel frets and blue-pearlescent fretboard inlays. Electronics include a piezo-bridge pickup system and DiMarzio Dreamcatcher (bridge) and Rainmaker(neck) pickups. The guitar includes a John Petrucci autographed backplate and comes with a certificate of authenticity. **$5,499 and up. music-man.com**

CORT G300 PRO ▲

The G300 Pro is the new flagship model in Cort's G Series. Features include 24 jumbo stainless-steel frets, an Ergo-V roasted-maple neck with a compound-radius roasted maple fretboard, Luminlay side dots, an American basswood body with 1/4-inch maple cap, Seymour Duncan humbuckers, staggered locking tuners, a solid-steel-block CFA-III tremolo and a Graph Tech Black TUSQ nut. It's available in Vivid Burgundy and Black. **$749. cortguitars.com**

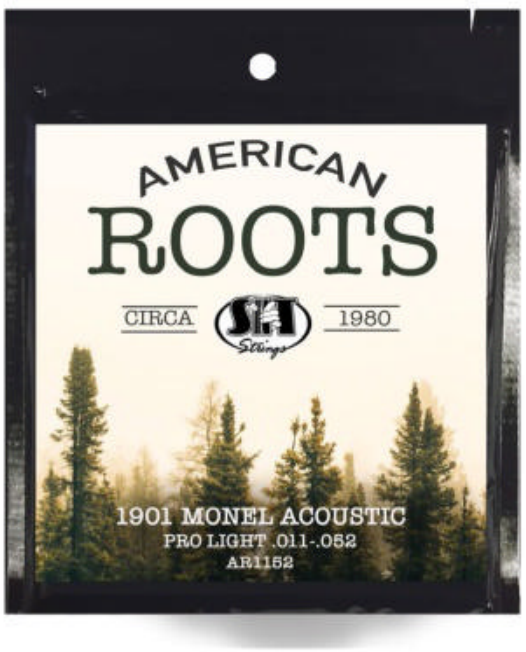
OR '22

HERE'S A PREVIEW OF WHAT'S COMING YOUR WAY IN THE MONTHS AHEAD.

PEAVEY

VYPYR X SERIES ▶

The new lightweight and portable VYPYR X2 and X3 combos are packed with features like variable instrument input, instrument models, universal delay and reverb, analog TransTube distortion, an onboard looper, Bluetooth remote control and audio streaming in. The amps have 12 stompbox effects with dual parameter control, 36 onboard amp models (including six acoustic and six bass amp models) and 26 onboard amp-accessible effects. The custom-voiced speakers are designed for amp modeling, and the custom cabinet is built for enhanced low-end response, with a semi-open back that delivers enhanced volume and tone. The amps feature a headphone jack for private and late-night sessions and a 3.5mm aux input for connecting external audio sources. **$199–$399. peavey.com**



S.I.T. STRINGS

AMERICAN ROOTS MONEL ACOUSTIC STRINGS ▶

The new American Roots Monel Acoustic Strings use a blend of nickel and copper that's formulated to produce a warmer tone and bring out the natural sound of your acoustic instrument. The strings are available in Pro Light, Light and Medium sets. **$11.99. sitstrings.com**

ESP LTD ALEXI RIPPED ▲

One of the final two Signature Series models designed by the late Alexi Laiho, and the first of the artist's signature models to include a neck pickup, the Alexi Ripped is built on a 25.5-inch scale and has neck-through-body construction with alder body wings. It features a three-piece thin U-shaped maple neck with natural satin finish, 24 extra-jumbo frets, and a Macassar ebony fingerboard (scalloped from frets 19 to 24) with sawtooth inlays and glow-in-the-dark side markers. The pickups are an EMG HZ F-H2 passive humbucker (bridge) and an EMG HZ S2 passive stacked-single-coil (neck), and hardware includes Grover tuners and a double-locking Floyd Rose 1000 bridge. The Alexi Ripped has a Purple Fade Satin finish with painted black-satin "ripped" pinstripes, with matching back and sides, and includes a deluxe ESP hardshell case. **$1,599. espguitars.com**

AMPLITUBE X-DRIVE DISTORTION, X-SPACE REVERB, X TIME DELAY AND X-VIBE MODULATION ◀

Each of AmpliTube's four new X-GEAR pedals features 16 effects drawn from the most popular AmpliTube models and all-new reverb and delay algorithms. All come with an exclusive virtual X-GEAR version of the exact same effects, so you can use the virtual versions with AmpliTube 5 (SE version included) to record and tweak settings and save as presets on the matching X-GEAR pedal. X-DRIVE features algorithms drawn from the most popular AmpliTube models and 50 presets. The effects include distortion, overdrive and fuzz models based on the Marshall Guv'nor, Boss MT-2, Ibanez Tube Screamer, Roger Mayer Octavia, Arbiter Fuzz Face and other classic pedals. X-SPACE has 16 all-new reverb algorithms and 50 presets, including Chamber, Church, Hall, Room, Plate, Gate and Reverse. X-TIME provides 16 all-new delay algorithms and 50 presets, including Analog Delay, Slapback, Ping-Pong, Reverse, Swell and more. X-VIBE has 16 all-new modulation algorithms and 50 presets that include '80s Chorus, Rotary, Tremolo, and models based on the '60s Univox Uni-Vibe, Foxx Phaser, MXR Flanger, Electro-Harmonix Small Stone and more. Each pedal features MIDI and a USB port that lets you use the pedal as a recording interface. **$299 each. ikmultimedia.com**

PRS McCARTY 594 SINGLECUT JOE WALSH LIMITED EDITION ▲

Limited to 200 pieces worldwide, this special guitar features a maple top, mahogany back, and a bound 24.594-inch-scale mahogany neck with a Brazilian rosewood fretboard and 22 frets. Electronics include PRS 58/15 LT+ pickups. **$6,550. prsguitars.com**

FENDER

Noventa Stratocaster

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

REVOLUTIONARY AS THE Stratocaster was when it debuted in 1954, players seeking to improve its performance have often replaced the thin-sounding single-coil in the bridge position with a humbucker, or perhaps a P-90 — a single-coil pickup introduced by Gibson in 1946, about 11 years before the company started using its newfangled humbucking pickup on some electric guitars. Fender has gone down the P-90 road in the past, beginning with the Strat-O-Sonic from 2003, which featured two Black Dove "Soapbar" pickups and a wrap-around-style Tech-Tonic bridge, and there have been various Custom Shop Teles and Strats carrying P-90s over the years. But the pickups haven't been offered on recent production-line S and T models until the Noventa series Telecaster, Stratocaster, and Jazzmaster landed in 2021 (accompanied by the Player Mustang 90). All feature Fender Noventa single-coils — one, two and three respectively — as well as other elements that make them quite different animals from their classic-style counterparts.

The Crimson Red Transparent Strat on review here immediately gets the point across when you see its twin pickups, truncated control complement (two knobs and a three-way selector) and a chrome-plated hardtail bridge on which the strings load Tele-style into metal ferrules on the back. The bolt-on maple neck has a very smooth satin finish and is carved into what Fender calls its Modern C profile, an inviting shape that practically begs you to play for long stretches. The striped, pau-ferro fingerboard carries 21 nicely crowned medium-jumbo frets that are trimmed on the ends for a smooth ride when sliding along the fretboard, and the synthetic bone nut received similar attention, so that it feels like part of the neck — only the top corners of the nut are a little sharp. The spot-on factory setup provides excellent playability and practically zero string buzz, and the intonation is tunefully accurate. At 7.28 pounds the guitar feels light and nimble.

The tightly coupled components, not to mention the absence of a vibrato system with its springs, claw and inertia block, help make the guitar sound

SPECIFICATIONS

Noventa Stratocaster
CONTACT fender.com
PRICE $1,099 street, gig-bag included

NUT WIDTH 1.650" synthetic bone
NECK Maple, bolt-on. Modern C profile
FRETBOARD Pau ferro, 25.5" scale, 9.5" radius, white dots
FRETS 21 medium jumbo
TUNERS Vintage style
BODY Alder, Crimson Red Transparent finish
BRIDGE Hard-tail Strat with six adjustable bent-steel saddles
PICKUPS Fender Noventa single-coils
CONTROLS Volume, tone, three-way selector
FACTORY STRINGS Fender .010–.046
WEIGHT 7.28 lbs (as tested)
BUILT Mexico

KUDOS Excellent playability and tones. Rock solid build
CONCERNS Nut corners are sharp

resonant and sustaining when played acoustically, and those traits remained front and center when plugged into a Fender Deluxe Reverb, a Tone Master Super Reverb or a Victoria Double Deluxe 2x12 combo. The Noventa is louder and meatier than a standard Strat, and it also reminded me a bit of the Reverend Gristle 90 (reviewed August 2021) in the sense that the bridge position is girthy sounding and has that slightly quacky-but-cutting texture that makes a good P-90 so cool for lead playing. The Noventa pickups also sound great combined for a full, crisp tone that's less biting than the bridge pickup by itself, and the neck position is balanced and has plenty of top-end for solos, yet easily cops a cool jazz vibe with a downward twist of the tone knob.

This streamlined Strat has a lot of tonal vibe, and it's a gas to play thanks to its nice setup and overall attention to detail. As a do-it-all guitar that can cover a lot of bases, the Noventa Strat delivers a lot of bang for the buck and could easily be a go-to axe for players who gig in a variety of situations and need one guitar that can do it all. In fact, in many ways this new Fender fills that need, just like the original. However, as the Noventa aptly demonstrates, less can be more when it comes to the Stratocaster.

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Fralin PICKUPS

BOSS

IR-200 Amp & IR Cabinet

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

AMP MODELING ISN'T new territory for Boss. The company has plied those waters for many years and to popular effect with latter-day products like the GT-1000 floor controller and Katana amp series. But this compact and truly stompbox-sized offering somehow feels like a step in a new and entirely natural direction. The IR-200 Amp & IR Cabinet presents an impressive features-to-size ratio and might be one of the boldest efforts yet to squeeze an entire rig into the smallest space possible, while still offering a comprehensive menu of amp types, cab sims, room reverbs and bountiful user-programmable preset slots.

In naming the IR-200 Amp & IR Cabinet, Boss has overtly recognized the explosion in credence given to an impulse response (IR) technology and its ability to accurately replicate the sounds of speaker cabinets in the digital realm, while potentially confusing the issue a little. The feature is just a small fraction of what this little box can do. It also packs eight guitar amps (the usual classics from clean, to jangle, to crunch, to singing lead), three bass amps, dual IR slots for genuine stereo processing (with 154 IRs from Boss and Celestion and 128 user-loadable slots), and EQ and spatial processing. All this, plus a full and intuitive amp-like interface, bountiful connectivity, and easy access and edit functions. So, deep breath… let's dive in.

Controls in the amp section include the self-explanatory gain, level, bass, middle and treble knobs. Call up a preset using the memory rotary selector in the top-right of the unit (which doubles as headphone volume when pushed) or the up/down foot switches and these parameters will all be fixed per preset. But turn the gain control, for example, and the display shows the change in setting, along with the current preset settings of the other knobs. The amp and cabinet controls dial alternatives for each of those within any selected preset (push either one to enter and tweak their parameters), and the ambience knob determines the reverb depth while it accesses the three main types: Hall, Room and Studio. All changes can be saved as new presets in any of 128 user memory slots.

Connectivity is impressive for a box this size. There's a single input, FX loop send with stereo return, stereo outputs, MIDI in and out on mini jacks, aux in, stereo headphone out, connection for control or expression pedals, and a USB port that lets you use the pedal as an interface for recording on Mac, Windows, and iOS devices. Some naysayers will point out the lack of XLR outputs, but those would be a tough fit on this 5 by 4 by 1.75–inch box. The available stereo ¼-inch outs should adapt to any conceivable requirement — although they're unbalanced TS, and balanced TRS would have been a nice touch.

Tech-wise, it's all backed up by 32-bit AD/DA conversion using Roland/Boss's Adaptive Focus method, at a sampling frequency of 96 kHz, with 32-bit floating-point processing. If you're noting a lack of pedal-style effects, that's what the loop is for. Rare in a unit this size, the mono send and stereo return are intended for full integration with your pedalboard, which is where Boss sees this box putting down roots. Drive pedals in front, delay and modulation in the loop, and Bob's your uncle.

I tested the IR-200 in stereo with studio monitors and headphones, and in mono with a Tech 21 Power Engine Deuce Deluxe, using a Les Paul and a Stratocaster, and I found it both easy to come to grips with and a lot of fun. Although the guitar-amp models seem a bit generic — a clean original Boss platform, a JC-120, a Twin Reverb, an AC30, a tweed

SPECIFICATIONS

IR-200 Amp & IR Cabinet
CONTACT boss.com
PRICE $399 list/street

CONTROLS Memory knob, menu and exit buttons; amp, cab and ambience knobs; gain, level, bass, middle, treble knobs; up and down footswitches
DSP 32-bit, 96 kHz
CONNECTIVITY Input, FX loop send/return, mono/stereo outputs, MIDI in/out, Aux in, headphone out, USB Micro-B port, Ctl 1, 2/Exp. Out, DC in
WEIGHT 1.5 lbs
BUILT Malaysia

KUDOS An impressive selection of amp models and IR cabs in a compact unit at a great price, with versatile interface and routing options
CONCERNS Clean amp models might sound a little sterile

Bassman, a Boss X-Hi Gain, a Marshall Super Lead and a Bogner Uberschall — they're each well-judged renditions of the archetype and won't likely befuddle the average user. Each is broadly tweakable with respect to speaker cabinet, miking and room ambience options, as well as the usual gain and EQ parameters, and it's easy to find usable, enjoyable and fully personalizable sounds.

If anything, the cleaner options are a little sterile, without the tubey edge-of-breakup tone some would like to attain when dialing in the real thing at the sweet spot. But as part of a floor-based fly rig with a selection of pedals for dirt, they proved entirely adequate and played nicely with a TS9 Tube Screamer, an Angry Charlie and a Wampler Tumnus Deluxe, for starters. Crank up the crunch and high-gain-intended models, though, dial them in to taste, and it's difficult not to find yourself smiling, especially with a little volume going in the room to aid touch sensitivity and sustain, or a nice ambient stereo mix in the cans.

The IR-200 will find some natural rivals in the Strymon Iridium and Atomic Ampli FireBox, both of which are in a similar price range and excel at their basic amp sounds, if falling a little short on presets, deep-dive programmability and LCD displays. (Though the IR-200's screen may look outdated, it's very readable in most lights.) All in all, this is a fun and powerful pedal that is likely to be extremely popular.

MARTIN

Grand J-16E 12-String

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

WHILE MUCH OF the attention paid to Martin over the past year understandably went to David Gilmour signature models, new ukes and the 00L Earth guitar, we'd be remiss not to take a good look at another interesting offering: the Grand J-16E. It's a 12-string with 14 frets to a Grand J body, which is a rare combination. Martin's standard J is essentially a deeper M/0000 style, but this Grand J combines the shallower depth of an M or triple 0 with a broad, jumbo-sized waist designed for maximum top surface and ergonomic comfort sitting or standing, plus a dual-element Fishman electronics system to deliver its signal to an eager audience. Considering the bevy of 12-string coverage in recent Frets features with David Crosby, Leo Kottke and Taj Mahal, we were hyped up to put this unique Martin through a few paces.

The Grand J-16E arrived in a gig bag with a groovy blue interior. A good look at the guitar reveals the hallmarks of Martin's 16-17 line, fine American craftsmanship made with a conservative aesthetic to keep the cost conservative as well. The guitar has a few nice appointments, including a bold herringbone with multi-stripe rosette, and antique-white body binding. The classic wood combination is solid East Indian rosewood with a Sitka spruce top.

This instrument is ergonomically engineered for a fantastic feel. It's a pretty big fella, and I'm a diminutive dude, but it was comfortable to play sitting, standing or walking around. The Grand J-16E's high performance neck taper felt comfy in hand, and I was able to strum or fingerpick it pretty much like I would a six-string, as the neck width at the nut is only slightly larger than standard — 1.81 inches compared to 1.75. Sure, those 12 strings dig into the fingertips more than six, but Martin mitigates that as well by stringing it up with an extra-light set.

The combination of extra-light strings on a shallow

SPECIFICATIONS

Grand J-16E 12 String
CONTACT martinguitar.com
PRICE $2,099 street

NUT WIDTH 1.81", bone
NECK Select hardwood with dark mahogany color
FRETBOARD Ebony with Style 28 mother-of-pearl inlays, 25.4" scale
FRETS 20
TUNERS Chrome enclosed gear
BODY Solid Sitka spruce top, solid East Indian rosewood back and sides, scalloped Sitka spruce X bracing
BRIDGE Ebony with compensated white Tusq saddle and black Tusq bridge pins
ELECTRONICS Fishman Matrix VT Enhance NT2
FACTORY STRINGS Martin Authentic Acoustic SP Extra Light 12 String 92/8 Phosphor Bronze SMA500T
WEIGHT 5.5 lbs
BUILT USA

KUDOS Great playability, comfort and American craftsmanship, with fine acoustic and amplified tones at a reasonable cost
CONCERNS None

body with a wide waist all adds up to chimey 12-string tone, with a shimmering top end, plenty of mids and decent bass response that provides a pretty solid balance without being as abundant as it would be on a full-depth jumbo with rosewood back and sides. It didn't have as much boom as a Martin M-36 with medium-gauge strings, which is interesting because it's the same depth with less width. I'll attribute that to overall design intention on the J-16E, evidenced by the choice of those light strings. Surely, heavier ones would add low end while making playability a bit more challenging.

Plugged into an L.R. Baggs Synapse Personal P.A., the stealthy onboard Fishman Matrix VT Enhance NT2 did a fantastic job representing the J-16E's unique sound. The Matrix undersaddle piezo does the heavy lifting, while an extra soundboard transducer captures extra top end and percussiveness, kind of like a microphone that one can dial in according to taste and style with the enhance dial. With the Fishman's flexibility, including a scooped tone dial, one can achieve amplified tones that are either more robust or more chimey than the J-16E sounds acoustically.

If you're a serious acoustic player, you really should have a 12-string in the arsenal, and this one checks a lot of boxes. I found it fabulous for the studio, both as a textural tool and for rendering outline arrangements, because it helps boil parts down to their essentials. Onstage with a band, it swaps in easily because of the neck playability, manageable depth and bridled low end that doesn't fight for space with the bass. Martin's Grand J-16E is an exceptionally utilitarian 12-string that covers a ton of ground without breaking the bank, and for that it earns an Editors' Pick Award.

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CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS

Falcon and Killer V Pedals

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

TESTED BY MICHAEL ROSS

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE poring over gear pages and videos to get one day-dreaming about vintage instruments and amps. Coming up with the cash for the collectible stuff, or even the boutique equivalents, can be challenging in the best of times, but fear not, Crazy Tube Circuits has a solution in a pair of affordable pedals that use JFET technology to emulate the overdriven and clean sounds in some of the most desirable amplifiers ever produced.

Falcon

Having first built a custom amp designed to morph between the sounds of a 5E3 tweed Deluxe and a 6G2 brownface Princeton, Crazy Tubes decided to design those sounds into a pedal. If you love the exploding amp tones of Neil Young and/or Daniel Lanois, the '55 side of the Falcon is for you. Plugging in a Les Paul with P-90s, clicking the toggle switch left and cranking the volume knob produced classic Fender tweed overdrive sounds, even through a Fender Blues Junior. There is nothing pristine here: The low end is far from tight and the high end is raw and ragged. It is a sound you either love or don't.

If you have ever heard Lanois play, you know he can greatly vary the amount of drive with just his touch and guitar volume. Like Lanois' tweed, the Falcon cleans up beautifully when you play lighter or back off your guitar volume, and turning down the pedal's volume knob also makes the sound more polite, yet still rife with tweed character.

Clicking the toggle right engaged the '61 brown Princeton side. The Fender version of "the brown sound" is often described as sitting between the roughness of the tweed years and the smoother, scooped sound of the blackface models. That accurately describes the Falcon brown version as well. There was less breakup on tap, and the low end was more focused. The response to picking dynamics remained fantastic.

Killer V

This pedal was inspired by Magnatone amplifiers of the '50s and '60s with a true pitch-shifting vibrato circuit. Those amps and their vibrato helped shape signature sounds for Lonnie Mack and Robert Ward. The Killer V uses an all-analog LFO to drive two discrete phase-shift modulation stages and create a pitch-modulation effect. As with most of the originals, you can run the modulated signal alone for a vibrato effect or add the dry signal for phaser/Uni-Vibe sounds. The basic drive level is closer to that of the Falcon's '61 than its '55 setting, but you can go under the Killer V's hood to increase the gain. A surface three-way toggle lets you voice the emulation to Bright, Normal, or Mellow.

The Killer V's drive is a unique form of grit that screams rock and roll, but its vibrato is the true selling point here. The purely modulated setting served up a useful, spooky warble that stopped well short of nausea inducing, and adding the dry signal produced a rich, inspiring vibe. With the gain turned low, this setting conjured visions of Ry Cooder, a sound that was hard to put down.

Either of these pedals can add cool vintage character and drive to your pedal platform amp. And unlike the originals, they can do this at any volume. As another plus, the Falcon and Killer V respond beautifully when driven by boost, overdrive and fuzz pedals, just like a real amp. If you play any kind of roots/Americana music, the Falcon and Killer V are both deserving of your hard-earned scratch.

SPECIFICATIONS

Falcon
CONTACT crazytubecircuits.com
PRICE $189

CONTROLS Volume, output, tone, 59/61 toggle
BUILT Greece

KUDOS Authentic tweed and brownface tones; terrific touch dynamics and guitar volume response
CONCERNS None

Killer V
CONTACT crazytubecircuits.com
PRICE $199

CONTROLS Volume, master, bass, treble, depth, speed. Switches for voice and wet/dry-wet
BUILT Greece

KUDOS Magnatone amp- and vibrato-style tones. Terrific touch dynamics and guitar volume response
CONCERNS None

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CICOGNANI ENGINEERING

Sexyboost2 Analog Tube Boost

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

DISTRIBUTED BY GODLYKE, this hand-built, tube-powered boost pedal from Italy's Cicognani Engineering takes a dual-channel approach by featuring foot-switchable clean boost and mid-boost controls, a global cut knob and a bypass foot switch. A single LED indicates which circuit is active — green is clean boost and red is mid boost — and bypass (or "on" actually) is indicated with a blue LED. The switches are click-on/click-off mechanical types, and the unit appears to be well made and features high-quality components — at least judging by what is viewable, since the PC board inside obscures much of the actual circuit.

However, the all-important 12AU7 tube is visible under a triangular plexiglass cover mounted to the die-cast metal housing, which is also covered with a panel of clear plexiglass. Power is supplied by a 12-volt DC adapter (not included) rated at a minimum 250mA. The unit measures approximately 5.5 x 4.5 x 1.25 inches and weighs a little under a pound.

The Sexyboost2 works great to boost an amp that's on the edge of breakup into full-on distortion. Plugged into a Deluxe Reverb or a Victoria Double Deluxe (both with volume set to around halfway), the Clean Boost side sounded very transparent and allowed me to dial in just the right amount of level to overdrive the amps for beefier and more sustaining tones. Alternately, I could set it to about two o' clock for a lesser amount of boost and then toggle the mid boost with the knob fully cranked or thereabouts for a high-gain lead tone that had more midrange presence — but also less treble — which can be further tweaked to taste with the cut control, which trims highs as you turn it clockwise. The tube circuitry also maintains excellent headroom, so there's no feeling of compression when you kick on the pedal (other than what the hotter signal is doing to the amp itself), and the feel under the fingers is dynamic and expressive.

The Sexyboost2 basically turns a single-channel amp into a three-channeler with two voicing choices and two variable gain levels, and that's reason enough to give it a close look if you're seeking to expand your amp's OD capabilities.

The 12AU7 tube is visible beneath a plexiglass cover.

SPECIFICATIONS

Sexyboost2 Analog Tube Boost
CONTACT godlyke.com
PRICE $279

CONTROLS Clean boost, mid boost, cut
FOOT SWITCHES Boost, bypass
TUBES One 12AU7
POWER SUPPLY 12VDC adapter
BUILT Italy

KUDOS Foot-switchable transparent boost and mids-forward boost. Effective Cut control. High-headroom tube circuit
CONCERNS 12VDC adapter not included

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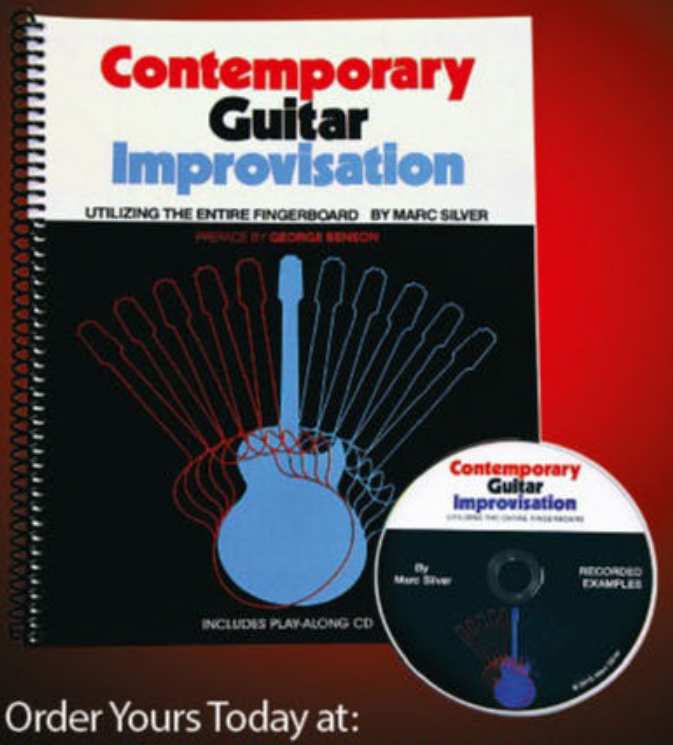

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How I Wrote...

"I Love Rock 'N' Roll"

The late Alan Merrill recalled how his flop became Joan Jett's runaway hit.

BY MARK McSTEA

Alan Merrill front and center with Arrows on their TV show, November 1976

JOAN JETT HAS so fully inhabited her 1981 signature hit, "I Love Rock 'N' Roll," that most people assume she wrote it. In fact it was penned by Alan Merrill, a New Yorker who in 1974 moved to the U.K., where he found success with the glam act Arrows. Although the group scored a handful of hits, ironically "I Love Rock 'N' Roll" didn't even scrape the lower reaches of the U.K. charts and might have been forgotten forever had Jett not chosen to cut it.

Merrill told me the story behind the song's creation in 2016, and we remained close friends up to his untimely death from Covid-19 in March 2020, making him one of the pandemic's earliest victims.

"Arrows needed a fourth single, and Mickie Most, our producer and owner of our label [*Rak*], suggested I try to come up with something, as our first three singles had been written for us," he explained. "He said, 'Think of a simple three-chord rocker with an anthemic sing-along chorus and a great riff.'"

FROM JET FARE...

Merrill responded to Most's request with "Shake Me," a three-chord rocker in a vein similar to "I Love Rock 'N' Roll," but the producer rejected it (although it later became a hit for Rick Derringer, with whom Merrill performed in the 1980s). "Mickie said that I was on the right lines, so I went away and came up with the chorus for 'I Love Rock 'N' Roll,'" Merrill explained. "The Stones had just released 'It's Only Rock 'n Roll,' which sounded a bit apologetic to me. I wanted to say it loud and clear. I wrote the riff, the guitar break and the verses that night. I played it for Mickie on an acoustic guitar and he told me that was exactly what he meant."

Although Merrill was the sole writer, Jake Hooker was given a co-writing credit in return for having paid Merrill's air fare from Tokyo to London in 1974. "I gave him half of the B-side royalties from Arrows' records, but I was the sole writer on all of the songs," Merrill said. "Given our level of indebtedness for recording expenses and retainers and whatever, I thought we'd never see any money, as it all went to paying off our debt."

SEAT UPGRADE

Initially, Most wanted "I Love Rock 'N' Roll" as the B-side to the Arrows cut "Broken Down Heart." Fate intervened when the producer's wife heard the single and said "I Love Rock 'N' Roll" was far too good to be a flipside. Most agreed, and he rushed the band back into the studio to record a more powerful version worthy of the A-side. In the studio, Merrill and Hooker handled the song's guitar work.

"Jake was a great rhythm player, but I came up with the riffs and ideas for lead breaks on Arrows' records," Merrill said. "I doubled his parts on 'I Love Rock 'N' Roll' and showed him what to play for the brief solo."

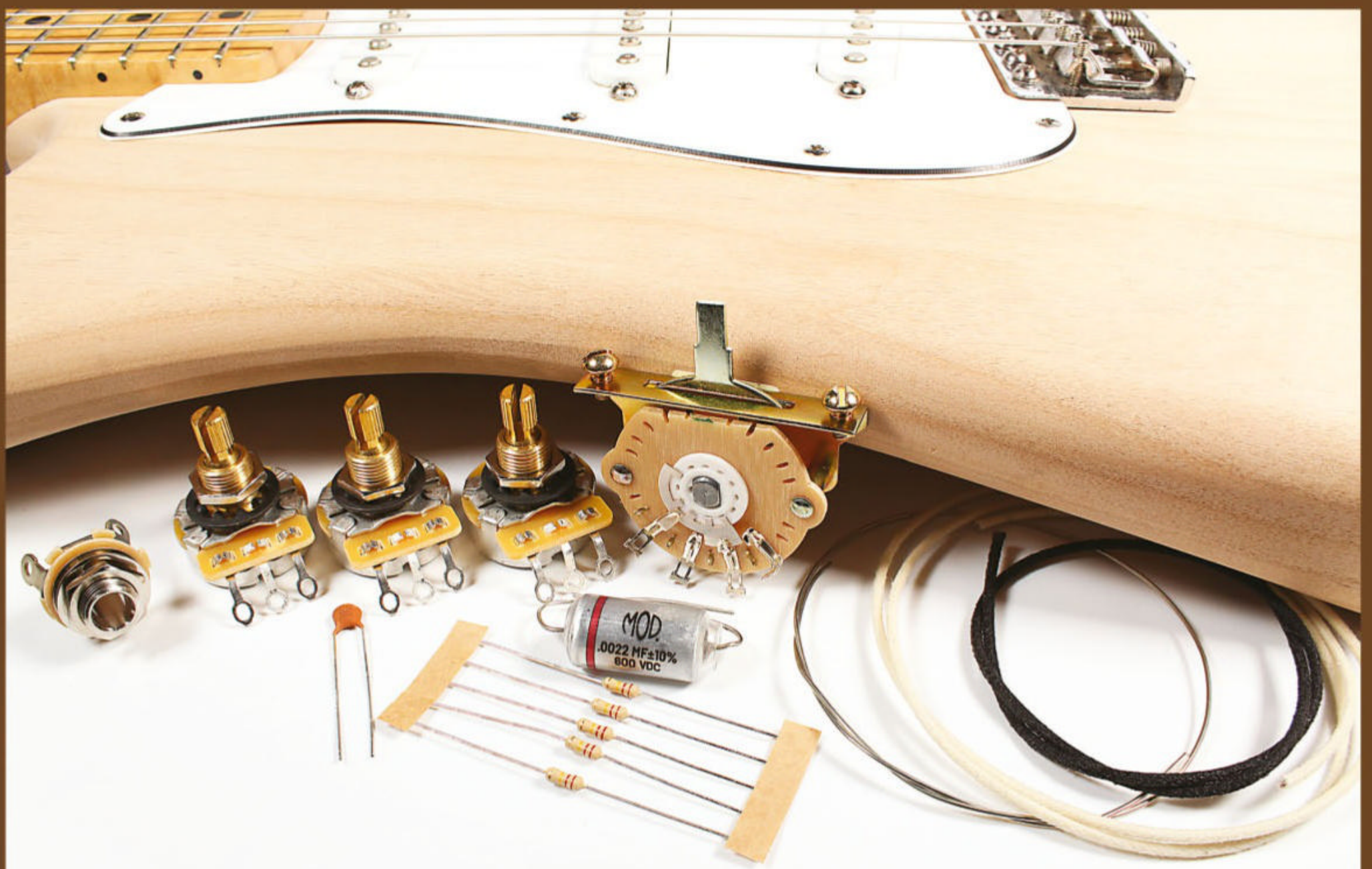
"THE STONES HAD JUST RELEASED 'IT'S ONLY ROCK 'N ROLL,' WHICH SOUNDED APOLOGETIC TO ME. I WANTED TO SAY IT LOUD AND CLEAR"

...TO JETT FARE

Remarkably, the newly cut track sank without a trace upon its release. But one person who felt strongly about the song's potential was Jett, who saw the Arrows perform the song on their weekly self-titled U.K. TV series while she was touring England with the Runaways in 1976. She first covered the song in 1979 with former Sex Pistols Steve Jones and Paul Cook, releasing it as the B-side to her single "You Don't Own Me." But it was her 1981 remake, cut with her band the Blackhearts, featuring Ricky Byrd on lead guitar, that became a number-one hit single.

"Jake used to say that it took him 15 minutes to write 'I Love Rock 'N' Roll,' which used to really annoy me," Merrill said. "The 15 minutes was how long it took me to teach him how to play it. But as I've gotten older I've taken a more philosophical approach to the whole thing. Life has its own way of working things out, and I guess if things hadn't panned out the way they did, Joan might never have heard the song, not had the hit, and I wouldn't have the life that I've got now. I think the song has earned about 50 million dollars to date in worldwide royalties. Considering that the plane ticket cost Jake a thousand bucks, he got a pretty good return."

ERICA ECHENBERG/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



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